

UNIQUE VOICES IN THE JOURNEY OF FAITH:
AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Unique Voices in the Journey of Faith: An Asian Perspective

by Eun-Hye Choi

The study addresses two main questions: “How do Asian Christians understand faith?” and “How is their faith shaped and nurtured?” The first question is a theological question and the second is an educational question. Understanding how faith is formed and nurtured and what kinds of theological issues are involved in faith formation are crucial issues in Christian religious education. Three Asian congregations were chosen for study and members of Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese congregations were interviewed. In addition to a comprehensive literature research, identical interview questions were used in each congregation.

From the study of these Asian congregations several main themes were found. Asian Christians are concerned with the theology of salvation of their non-Christian family members and friends. They also struggle with the issue of ancestor worship. A main concern is how to show appropriate respect for their ancestors in the life of family and community. The study with these congregations also identified the struggle between faith and good works as a common source of concern. They believe that they are saved by faith; but they still want to see and show the good works as evidence of faith. This is due to the influence of the Confucian tradition of a high moral life.

The study found that Asian Christians understand faith as the Way (*Do*), which is constantly moving and changing in dynamics and unity of whole life and whole world. Asian Christians are seeking a fresh understanding of the Bible and Christian faith on the basis of their cultural and religious experiences. They state an understanding of biblical

teachings not as understanding doctrine or faith formulas; but respecting the way of life that the Bible teaches as a whole. For them, faith is living a Christian life on the *way* in communities.

Regarding the question of how Asian Christians shape and nurture their faith, Asian Christians shape and nurture their faith in communities. These communities are traditionally understood as communities of concentric circles from family to church, and to cosmos. The alternative model of religious Christian education for Asian is suggested to develop the faith community of spiral stairs rather than the community of concentric circles. The faith communities of spiral stairs begin with Logos (gospel) and continues building up communities in solidarity with others, nature, cosmos, and God. This faith community of spiral stars moves on the *Way* and keeps journeying toward God. It is a sequence of open communities and open journeys. On the journey people are open to questions and struggles and open to God's guidance. The tasks of religious Christian education are to empower people to follow the Spirit in faith communities and to encourage all Christians to journey together on the *Way* of spiral stairs.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Problems Addressed by the Project

This project deals with the theological and educational issues that Asian Christians experience in their faith journeys. Most existing theological and religious education theories have not adequately addressed the theological issues that Asian Christians struggle with. This project discusses unique theological issues that are not commonly addressed by Western theologies and religious education. This project also discusses how Christian religious education may help Asian Christians develop with a better understanding of their own Christian faith and spirituality.

Importance of the Problem

Understanding how faith is formed and nurtured and what kinds of theological issues are involved in people's faith journey are crucial issues in Christian religious education. According to Jack Seymour and Donald Miller, "Educators/theologians consider five crucial issues which have been historically important for Christian education: the nature of the tradition (knowledge about God), the role of the church, the nature of human beings, the mission of the church in the world, and the method of theology."¹

I understand that there have been two main trends in understanding faith formation in the history of religious education. One has emphasized the immanent nature

¹ Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, "Openings to God: Education and Theology in Dialogue," in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Seymour and Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 10.

of faith and the other the transcendent nature of faith. I consider that faith development theory is an immanent theory and conversion experience theory is a transcendent theory. These two trends often stand in tension with each other, and the argument about how faith is formed and nurtured swings first toward one and then toward the other pole.

The problem is that both sides focus mainly on individual human experiences and existence to understand faith. Neither side considers seriously the dynamics of multifold religious/cultural and spiritual experiences of the people and the influences of the society and communities in which individuals participate and interact. According to this problem another group of scholars began to see the nature of the church as a primary issue to be addressed by Christian education. They understand that education itself is transformed by the context of the community of faith.² They see the church from the perspectives of sociology and anthropology as well as the perspective of theology.

They consider the theological and biblical nature of the faith community, however, I think that they do not consider the dynamics and influence of other religious/spiritual traditions (namely Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism, Taoism, and Shintoism) that are embedded in individual Asian Christians and their communities. As C. S. Song points out, the theology constructed on the marriage between Christianity and western civilization cannot serve the spirituality that grows, develops, and creates outside the framework of Constantinian Christianity.³ I believe that the Spirit of God works through faith communities, which have multi religious traditions – and that communities are active in the leading of experiencing the transcendent nature of faith.

Asian Christians are born in an environment in which multi religious traditions

² Ibid., 13.

³ C.S. Song, *Third-eye Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 5.

and heritage are dominant. Though they are born in Christian families and churches, their multi religious heritages and religious culture are as much a part of them as are their own flesh and bones. In the book, *Journeys at the Margin*, David Ng, a Chinese-American theologian and educator says,

I do not recall every faving heard a lecture on Confucian values, certainly not from my father or mother...A lofty concepts of family, loyalty, mutuality, reciprocity, filial piety, and such were not taught, at least not in so many words. I simply grew up in the Ng family who lived in China town. Fifty years later while watching Bill Moyer's interview Tu Weiming, a Confucian scholar, I know immediately what Tu meant when he said that Chinese have a "Confucian DNA." I do.⁴

I totally agree with Ng and I believe that East Asians – mainly China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam - share the "Confucian DNA" in addition to each country's own ancient indigenous religious DNAs. Thus, it is important to address their struggles to understand the nature of Christian faith and how it should be nurtured in the midst of different religious/spiritual experiences.

Thesis

The thesis of my project is to examine of the theological issues that Asian Christians experience and express in their faith journeys but are not commonly addressed by Western theologies in order to discuss implications for Asian Christians' Religious Education and to suggest an alternate religious educational model for them.

⁴ David Ng, "A Path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community," in *Journeys at the Margin*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 88.

Definitions of Major Terms

Asian Christians: I use the term “Asian Christians” in this project referring to Chinese, Korean, Japanes, Vietnamese immigrants to the U.S.A who are Christians and I include 1.5 generation immigrants too. The 1.5 generation immigrants are people who were born in their home countires and immigrataed to the U.S.A. with their parents before they reached adulthood. Asian Christians from those four countries share common religious and cultural traditions and heritages namely Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and other spiritualities.

Faith Journey: I use the term “Faith Journey” as an open-ended understanding of the faith formation process as stated in the gospel of John 14:4-6, The Way. The way is a symbol that Jesus used to describe his revelatory work. As with logos (The Word), hodos (The Way) has a certain richness in Judeo-Christian religious discourse as well as in the discourse of Asian religions. Within the Jewish wisdom tradition, "way" denotes the lifestyles of the "wise" and "wicked."⁵ It is an expression of the faithful person's unity with God. It is a metaphor for life with God. The Asian religious understanding of the "way" (Tao or Do) refers to the circular symbol of ying-yang, the symbol of the relationship between Creator and creatures or the Ultimate Being and limited beings. As Heup Young Kim and David Ng say, “Faith or belifs are not static; they are not established in final form so long as there is life and the possibility of new experiences and new learnings. It can be said again and again that for Asians, life is ‘the Way.’”⁶

⁵ Gail R. O'Day, “The Gospel of John,” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, ed. Leanden E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 742.

⁶ Heup Young Kim and David Ng, “The Central Issue of Community: An Example of Asian North American Theology on the Way,” in *People on the Way*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press, 1996), 28.

Works Previously Done in the Field

In his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, James Fowler insists faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture. As the subtitle of his book implies, he understands faith development from the standpoint of the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning. After examining the concept of faith in connection with the concepts of religion, belief, human imagination, and relationships in community, he says, “we have considered faith as a human phenomenon, an apparently generic consequence of the universal human burden of finding or making meaning.”⁷

According to Fowler humanity is unable to live in a world that does not cohere meaningfully. Consequently, it seeks to bring order to the world, constructing frameworks of meaning that prove to be dependable as one continues to interact with the world. When the world poses challenges and anomalies, which do not resonate with one’s present framework of meaning, that framework becomes modified and sometimes reconstituted to restore an adaptive balance. He explains the dynamics of faith with the triad of faithing: Self, others, and shared centers of value and power.⁸ For him the shared center of value and power is the ultimate concern that constitutes all of one’s beliefs.

Concerning Fowler’s understanding of faith development, James Loder takes up the issue of the relationship between the content of faith and the stage structure of faithing. Though acknowledging Fowler’s contribution to understanding faith, Loder also raises a question: Fowler wants to concentrate on the human aspect of faith, but the

⁷ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 33.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

decisive question for Christian education is how do Fowler's constructs relate to biblical understandings of faith?

In his book *The Transforming Moment*, Loder aims to clarify the character of a class of experiences that act upon us in such a way as to decisively change our ways of being in the world.⁹ He seeks to understand the moment of faith transformation. As transforming moments convictional experiences disrupt our assumptions about the world; they puncture our previous ways of making meaning; and they disclose to us dimensions of being, not previously attended to, which enable us to re-ground and realign our ways of seeing and being. Loder thinks humans fear facing the possibility of not being [void reality], but only through accepting void reality can humans transform themselves into new beings who relate to the ultimate manifestation of The Holy.

On the foundation of Karl Barth's faith epistemology of the Spirit, Frank Rogers insists knowing God is drastically different from humanity's ever-present need to construct meaningful worldviews.¹⁰ He sees that humans' unredeemed meaning-making activity is fueled by humanity's self-centered activity. Rogers insists what is lacking in the meaning-making model is the power and activity of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Using Barth's theology, Rogers argues that faith is an existential form of knowing that participates with the Holy Spirit which proceeds from the objective basis of Christ.¹² Thus Rogers maintains that faith, as a form of knowing in which one moves with increasing self-determination with the Holy Spirit, is an activity that is different from the activity of an

⁹ James E. Loder, "Conversations on Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' and Loder's 'The Transforming Moment'" *Religious Education*, 77 (1982): 135.

¹⁰ Frank Rogers Jr., *Karl Barth's Faith Epistemology of the Spirit as a Critical and Constructive Framework for Christian Education*, Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1991 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1991), 409.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 406.

¹² *Ibid.*, 416.

unredeemed humanity seeking to constructively know the world.¹³

Rogers believes the Holy Spirit is the teacher and faith is formed and guided in the movements of the Holy Spirit. He says, “The Spirit is the dynamic power in which education itself rests and with which education should seek to participate.”¹⁴ According to him, Christian educators should not so much envision how the Spirit participates with educational activity but rather how education participates with the Spirit which goes before such activity.¹⁵

I agree that the Holy Spirit is the teacher and faith is guided in the movements of the Holy Spirit. For Asian Christians, however, participating with the Spirit is both individual and communal. In Asian traditional religions people invite and participate with spirits in communal liturgy, chant, dance, and prayer as well as private prayer and meditation. Based on their traditional religious spiritual experiences Religious Education for Asian Christians should be more concerned about how education participates with the Holy Spirit communally and individually in faith communities.

Scope and Limitations

My research questions are two-fold: (1) How do Asian Christians understand “faith” and what issues do they experience in faithing or on the journey of faith? And (2) how do they nurture and educate faith in their faith communities? In this project I will look at the issue of how Asian traditional religious spiritual heritages impact Asian Christians’ understanding of faith among first and 1.5 generation Asian immigrants.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 454.

¹⁵ Ibid.

My limitation is that I studied only Asian congregations and Christians in the United States and do not include Asian Christians in Asia because I had limited time for my research and I believe that Asian traditional religions and spiritual traditions have a long history and have impacted all aspects of Asians' personal and communal lives. This impact is not changed easily even after they immigrate to the United States.¹⁶ I admit that there are different experiences between Asian Christians in Asia and Asian immigrant Christians in America but I do not distinguish them because I believe that their Asian religious and cultural heritages are in their bodies and in their "DNAs" and they do not change much no matter where they live in. One other limitation I have to point out is that though I refer to Japanese Christians to Asian Christian I do not study them in this project because of the limit of my time and resources.

In this project I will study three Asian Christian congregations in the United States and their members. They are a Chinese Baptist congregation in Claremont, CA, a Korean Presbyterian congregation in Mount Prospect, IL, and a Vietnamese United Methodist congregation in Chicago, IL. I will explain why I chose these churches in chapters 3, 4, and 5 when I deal with the themes that emerge from each congregation. The subjects of my interviews will be pastors of those congregations and their young adults and adult members.

Procedure for Integration

I will do library research first to position my research questions in the history of Christian religious education and theology. Second, I will use qualitative research to

¹⁶ In my project I do not include the second generation of Asian immigrants.

listen to the voices of Asian Christians with regard to faith-shaping aspects and how it is nurtured in the faith journey.

Methodology

I will do a phenomenological study to identify the structure and essence of understanding faith and its formation for Asian Christians. I want to uncover the nature of Asian Christians' understanding of faith and how they nurture and educate themselves in their communities. Phenomenology is the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses.¹⁷ One of the assumptions that distinguishes a phenomenological approach is the assumption that there is an essence or are essences of shared experience. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of a phenomenon, such as the essences of Asian Christians' understanding of faith. A phenomenological study is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience.¹⁸

For my research, I will interview four or five individuals from each congregation—clergy and laity, males and females—and observe their liturgies, Bible study, prayer meetings, and fellowship hour. I will also review written materials they have produced in their congregations such as newsletters and Sunday bulletins. My research will have four phases: story collecting, analysis, discovering themes, and implication.

* Sampling: To determine the sampling, I will use the snowball sampling method

¹⁷ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1990), 69.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

of locating information-rich key informants or critical cases.¹⁹ In choosing three congregations I will ask Asian pastors and other well-situated people about Asian congregations in America, “What churches should I go to to talk about Asian Christians faith?” By asking a number of people about whom to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as I accumulate new information-rich cases.²⁰ After I choose the three congregations again I will ask members in the congregations who should I talk to about faith in this congregation? I will include pastors in these individual interviews.

* Interview Questions:

- (1) Please tell me about your faith journey. Have you had any major conversion experiences or any critical experiences in your faith journey?
- (2) Who have been the most significant people in your faith journey and why?
- (3) How has this congregation been part of your faith journey?
- (4) What struggles do you experience in your life? How has your faith helped you to deal with them? Have you ever drawn from any other faith practice or tradition besides Christianity to help you through the struggle?
- (5) How would you describe your faith and the faith of this congregation?
- (6) How do you and your congregation relate with God?
- (7) What do you and your congregation do to nurture faith personally and communally?

I will tape record the interviews and transcribe them. I will interview Chinese and Vietnamese congregations in English and the Korean congregation in Korean and translate Korean to English when I transcribe them. After I finish the interviews I will

¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

²⁰ Ibid.

analyze all data (transcribed interviews, notes of observation, and the written documents of each congregation—news letters, Sunday bulletins, etc.) with open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of grounded theory. In grounded theory open coding fractures the data and allows a researcher to identify some categories. Axial coding puts those data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its sub-categories.²¹ The final stage of analysis will be integrating categories into major themes or story lines.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2: Who are my people and my neighbors? In this chapter I will tell my own stories that I have experienced in my faith journey as an Asian Christian who has lived in Korea and in the United States. I will review the religious history in Asian (China, Korean, and Japan). I will also review literature on the issues of faith and culture and of theology and education.

Chapter 3: What will happen to my family members who were not Christians after they die? (Korean Congregation) In this chapter I will tell the stories of a Korean congregation that has a dominant theme concerning the salvation of non-Christian family members.

Chapter 4: With what understanding do I participate in ancestor worship of my family? (Chinese Congregation) In this chapter I will tell the stories of a Chinese

²¹ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1990), 97.

congregation that has a dominant theme of how to understand ancestor worship in the light of gospel and their traditional religions and culture.

Chapter 5: Show me your faith. (Vietnamese Congregation)

In this chapter I will tell the stories of a Vietnamese congregation and that has a dominant theme of moral and ethical aspects of faith.

Chapter 6: Theology of Salvation and Theology of Community in Asian Contexts.

In this chapter I will examine Asian Christians' understanding of salvation and community. The unique issue of theology of salvation and theology of community that Asian Christians struggle with is that they raise the questions of salvation from the perspective of communities to where their identity and royalty belong. I found that there is an intersection or an overlapping area between the theology of community and theology of salvation in Asian context. I will discuss how these are interrelated to each other.

Chapter 7: Journey Together - Christian Religious Education in Communities.

I will deal with strengths and weakness of Asian Christians' understanding of faith and their ways of shaping and nurturing faith in faith communities. I will also deal with their possible contributions to religious education in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world by suggesting an alternate model of religious education.

CHAPTER 2

Who Are My People?

Introduction

With globalization of all aspects of contemporary life in America, American Christians experience or being more exposed to many different religious traditions and beliefs from Christianity. This dynamics of multifold religious/cultural and spiritual experiences of the people and the influences of those experiences invite Christians to ask the question of their religious identity. For Asian Christians who have long history of multi religious traditions and heritage, however, the issue of religious identity is not new. Though they are born in Christian families and churches, their multi religious heritages and religious culture are as much a part of them as are their own flesh and bones.

When I was young and lived in Korea my next-door neighbor was the chief shaman in our village.¹ My hometown was in the outskirts of Seoul, Korea, and existed between urban life and rural life. Most people had jobs in the town, but there were still rice-barley fields and farms. To go to school I walked across the rice fields with friends. During the winter season circuses traveling their circuits came and put tents in the rice fields. They attracted people with colorful banners and huge ribbons flying on the top of their tents.

Watching those circuses and *gut*² that my neighbor, the chief shaman, offered for the whole village once or twice a year was the most exciting experience in my childhood.

¹ In Korea shamans have a threefold role of priest, medicine man, and prophet and, in addition, promote folk-art and folk-culture.

² *Gut* is a general expression in the Korean language and refers to all kinds of shamanistic rituals. Shamanism uses archaic techniques of attaining and exhibiting ecstasy, and the shamans themselves occupy the position corresponding to "spirit" in other forms of magical-religious ecstasy.

The history of Korea's indigenous religion, shamanism, goes back a long time. The ancient origin of shamanism is shown in the myth of Tan'gun as the progenitor of the Korean people. Tan'gun was the first king and shaman who created the first dynasty on the Korean peninsula. Many early bibliographical references demonstrate an early recognition of the centrality of shamanism to Koreans' cultural identity.³

During my childhood the people of the village asked my neighbor, the shaman, to perform healing *guts* when they had ill people in their families. Those *guts* were small ones that lasted only one or two days. There were real big ones once or twice a year that the whole village people participated in. My parents did not allow their children to watch the *gut* and to eat the food from the shaman's altar because they believed *gut* is anti-Christian idol worship. However, I could not hold back my curiosity whenever there was a *gut*, and I usually sneaked out to see the *gut*.

The shaman wore a colorful robe and a beautifully decorated hat. He had several assistants who played music for him with drums and flutes. Food was prepared on the altar and tables under the altar that the village collected and prepared together. Once the *gut* started people made a circle, centering around the shaman and the musicians. The shaman chanted, bowed, and danced for the spirits that he communicated with. At the climax of the shaman's ritual there was a moment when the people believed a spirit descended on the shaman. While his chanting got faster the shaman took off his shoes and stood on two sharp swords with bare feet that his assistants were holding. Holding my breath with shock and amazement I felt the religious ecstasy of the people around me.

³ One of many early bibliographic references is *Tongguk Yi Sangguk Chip* by Yi Kyu-Bo (A Compilation of Works of Minister Yi of the Easter Country), 1251; reprint, Seoul: Tongguk Munhwasa, 1958.

After the *gut* was over the people sat down on the floor and ate together. They gave special candies to children, too.

One afternoon I sneaked out again to see to the *gut* and stayed there until dark. I didn't notice it was getting dark because most of the village and my friends were there. My parents were worried about me, and when they found me in the circle of the *gut* they gave me a severe punishment—raising up both arms for one hour. Next Sunday I sat in the church with my parents. When the church choir sang during the worship service, I felt the shaman's music and chants were ringing in my ears. Both shaman chants and church choir music were religious experiences to me, and I was confused why one experience is bad and the other is good.

When I entered college the time came that I began to seriously struggle with my religious identity. When I was a college student there was a strong movement in society that tried to revive Korean indigenous culture and religions—notably shamanism.⁴ At the Spring Campus Festival a group of students invited shamans and asked them to revive original *gut*. The *gut* was held in the school stadium, and students packed the place.

There were shamans chanting, making music, and dancing. It was a performance, but there was a sense of community, people came together because of their cultural and religious identity. After the *gut* was over the shamans distributed the food from the altar. When the food approached me my heart pounded strongly with the struggle over whether or not I should eat the food. When the food came to me I could not eat it because I

⁴ The 1970s and 1980s was a time of booming scholastic studies on shamanism motivated by a sense of nationalism and the desire to define the roots of Korean culture. See Richard W.L. Guisso and Chai-Shin Yu, *Shamanism: The Spirit World of Korea* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), 21-23.

learned since my childhood that Christians shouldn't eat the food sacrificed on the Shaman's altar, especially in public. I left the place with tears in my eyes; I realized I could not belong to the community that most of my friends belonged to.

That event made me think about culture, community, and theology and how they have formed my religious identity. Constant interaction with religious stories, practice, and thoughts beyond Christianity in daily life and culture in Korea and in Korean communities (family, school, and church) in America has formed the heartbeat of my theological reflection. Sometimes it has been joyful and sometimes it has been painful. It is joyful when I find new methods of theological reflection and interpretations about understanding Christianity and the encounter of Asian religions, which help constant reconstruction of my religious identity.

Most times, however, theological reflection from Asian religious tradition is painful because it is too overwhelming. As C.S. Song says, "Christian theology in Asia has been overweight with schools of theology, theories of biblical interpretation, Christian view of cultures and religions, all originating from the church in the West and propounded by traditional theology."⁵ He adds, "It became even more obese when the vast space of Asia, with its rich cultures, vigorous religions and turbulent histories, began to compete for room in that already over-loaded theological belly."⁶

I take courage, however, in looking at the overweight theological belly of Asian Christians. I want to see and study not only scholarly books and texts but also living texts—people and churches. I choose to move back and forth between these two sources

⁵ C.S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 2-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

for my study and struggle. The words of lay people in interviews I have conducted have sometimes confirmed theological issues that Asian theologians have been insisting on as unique issues of doing theology in Asian contexts. I have also sometimes found answers in written texts to the questions that I have heard from lay people in interviews.

In this project I start each chapter with literary research about the history of religions including Christianity in each country not to simply outline religious history in Asian countries but to confirm their manifold and multi-layered religious heritages and experiences. Then, I move to stories of each congregation to find major themes in terms of understanding Christian faith and how to nurture it. I believe that a story theology or narrative theology is a very Asian way of doing theology.⁷

Historical Background

Religions in Korea

Before Christianity came to Korea, Korea was already a religiously pluralistic society into which various streams of Asian and world religions flowed during different periods of history. Three thousand years of Korean religious history have shown the dominant religion of the day to be replaced in every period of history. This replacement took place in conjunction with socio-economic change, political upheaval, and the self-consciousness of the leading elite of the day. Though the major religion was replaced, non-leading religions were not expelled or extinguished but continued in the life of the general public, especially in the life of the ordinary people, *minjung*.

⁷ See, for example, C. S. Song, *Third-eye Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1979); and *Tell Us Our Names*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

In the period of ancient city-states shamanism was the major religion controlling the society. In the period of central government of the three kingdoms, the universal religion of Buddhism came to Korea from China but it was mixed with Korean indigenous shamanism. The three kingdoms of Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla (?- 660 A.D.), the High Shaman was a king and chief shaman for the kingdom. The kings of the three kingdoms were often called Ch'ach'a Ung or Ch'a ch'ung. "In the national Korean language, "Ch'ach'a ung" means shaman."⁸

For more than 1,000 years from the 4th century on, Buddhism, which was mixed with shamanism, established a uniquely Korean Buddhist culture as the national ideology. Buddhism in Shilla and Koryo kingdoms was able to offer to the Korean people a universal mind for life and a worldview. By turning to the great mercy of Buddhism, many people who suffered from war, hunger, and homelessness during the process of unifying the federal states into the unified kingdom found relief in Mahayana-Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism emphasized faith in Amida and the religious goal of being reborn in "Western Paradise."

During the Koryo dynasty (A.D. 918-1392), however, there arose the first recorded opposition to shamanism. This was due largely to the rising influence of Confucianism. Since then, shamans lost political power and influence and became priests of shaman rituals for healing and blessings. From the 14th century on, the Chosun dynasty took on Confucianism as the national ideology, controlling the social and moral norms. Because the country was becoming a modern society, the rational, practical, and

⁸ Chu-kun Chang, "An Introduction to Korean Shamanism" in *Shamanism*, eds., Chai-Shin Yu and R. Guisso, 31.

universal Confucianism suited them better. During this period the social status of shamans became lower and they were relegated to the lower class of merchants, artisans, butchers and entertainers. Eventually their freedom of mobility was restricted as they were forbidden access to the capital and prevented from carrying out ceremonies and rituals out-of-doors.⁹ In the long history of religions Korean Christians' theological belly is over-loaded with pluralistic Asian religious tradition and experiences as well as Christianity.

Religions in China

In China religion has played a no less significant role in the life of people than in other countries. During the course of some 3,500 years of history the Chinese developed their own distinctive religions. In China religion has permeated the wider culture. The history of Chinese religion can be broadly divided into three periods: "Ancient China (3rd to 2nd millennium B.C.), Early period (3rd century B.C. to 5th century A.D.), and Late period (6th to 20th century)." ¹⁰

The first period is from the middle of the second millennium BC up to the close of the Chou dynasty (A.D. 90). In this period indigenous religious concepts were developed and the philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism were developed which provided an intellectual basis for religious Confucianism and Taoism. In the second period Confucianism became the "state religion" of the Han dynasty, and during the later part of this period religious Taoism and Buddhism arose, grew strong, and flourished to compete with the traditional religion (mostly Confucianism). In the third period (from the Sung

⁹ Ibid., 32

¹⁰ See the Chronological Table in Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), xxiv.

dynasty to the Ching dynasty) religion became more and more eclectic because of the inter-penetration of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Chinese people who have developed and experienced many different religions—indigenous and foreign—know the struggle of dual religious citizenship.

Religions in Japan

Japan also has many religious traditions: the formal religions of Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and the practices and beliefs of folk religion. Shinto is the most ancient of all Japanese religious traditions, having grown out of prehistoric Japanese beliefs and practices. One of the chief characteristics of Shinto is the close and intimate relationship between humans and *kami*. (*Kami* can refer to one or many “deities.”) Generally the Japanese people have seen *kami* to be the source of life and blessing and have approached *kami* to pray for blessings and give thanks.

From the sixth century A.D. Chinese religions such Confucianism, religious Taoism, and Buddhism were introduced and Shinto became more formally organized and all religious traditions interacted in the lives of Japanese people. During the 14th to 19th centuries Europeans introduced Christianity and had brief success. But Confucian teachings mostly provided the social rationale for the Tokugawa ruling system. During the 19th century Shinto became a state religion of the modern nation-state.

Japanese people also have developed and experienced many different religions and they do not belong exclusively to just one religion. “It is common for a Japanese person to be active in more than one religious tradition: several traditions may be combined in one religious activity, or a person may resort to one tradition for one purpose

and then rely on another tradition for another purpose.”¹¹

New Paradigms for Doing Theology in Asian Contexts

The difficulties and problems that Asian Christians have faced are not only the overwhelming volume of materials that they should digest but also facing different understandings of religious pluralism between West and East and difficulties and confusions in communication of the concepts of religion and culture between West and East.

Richard Niebuhr said in his book, *Christ and Culture*, “But Christ and Christians threatened the unity of the culture at both points with their radical monotheism, a faith in the one God that was very different from the pagan universalism which sought to unify many deities and many cults under one earthly or heavenly monarch.”¹² From a Western Christian’s perspective Hans Küng also raises the questions, “Can one, may one, belong to two or more religions at the same time? Is there such a thing as dual religious citizenship? What is legitimate or illegitimate here?”¹³

In Asian history, before Christianity came, many different religions, both foreign and indigenous religions, had co-existed without paganizing each other. There has been no question about dual religious citizenship. Since Christianity came to Asia, however, religious identity became a difficult issue among converted Asian Christians. As I shared my experience above, I wanted to belong to the community of *gut* with my friends

¹¹ H. Byron Earhart, *Religions of Japan: Many Traditions Within One Sacred Way* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 22.

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 8.

¹³ Küng and Ching, 273.

because it provided a religious and cultural bond with my friends, but I could not eat the food from the altar because I learned that Christians should not eat the food from the shaman's altar. I struggled with my religious identity. Facing those problems Asian Christians have questions about how to digest and understand their religious tradition, culture, and heritage within their Christian faith without being accused of heresy or "not being faithful enough" to be a radical monotheist Christian. They wonder, "How do I build a healthy religious identity as a Christian?"

K. K. Yeo, a Chinese-American theologian and New Testament scholar, is searching for the identity symbols of Christians today, who live in a multi-religious world, through cross-cultural hermeneutics.¹⁴ He says,

What symbols are Christians to use in cross-cultural hermeneutics? Orthodox churches propose sacrament, liturgy, and right belief. Korean churches affirm prayer and fasting. Spanish churches want charismatic experience. White churches are fond of logical formulations and sound dogma. Evangelical churches speak of personal conversion and devotion. Who is right? Everybody is, because each tradition or emphasis defines or characterizes that particular church or denomination. But the problems arise when one group or race perceives its traditions or emphasis as the only true one or, worse still, imposes it on others as essential to the gospel of Christ.¹⁵

In his study of the book of Galatians Yeo concludes "Paul says to us today that the only essential identity symbol for Christians is faith in the crucified Christ (Gal. 2:20)."¹⁶

For Westerners, as a result of intellectual development, especially since the advent of the critique of religion in the seventeenth century, culture means civilization or the world of reason or material. Since then, they either remained religious and Christian

¹⁴ See K. K. Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing?* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1998).

¹⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶ Ibid.

or they moved from being non-religious to being atheistic. Niebuhr defines culture: “Again, culture in all its forms and varieties is concerned with the *temporal and material realization of values*.”¹⁷

In Asia, however, religions have penetrated continually in the life of the general public, and in the life of ordinary people in the form of daily culture as well as in the form of national ideology and philosophies of the leading elites. Religions have been dominant family, social, political, and cultural forces, and they have shaped the life of people and the history of the nations. There has not been a separation of religion and culture, religion and reason, or religion and the material world in the lives and faith of Asian peoples.

Asian Christians need new or different paradigms of multi-faith or cross-cultural hermeneutics, theology, and education rather than Western traditional paradigms. For instance Kyung Jae Kim, a Korean theologian who studied in Germany, suggests a method of correlation, fusion of horizons and paradigm shifts between Asian traditional religions and Christianity.

Kim examines four types of relationships between Asian religious culture and Christianity. “The four types shall be labeled as the sowing model, the yeast model, the converging model, and the grafting model. These models are ways to classify the encounter of the gospel with the Korean culture just as Richard Niebuhr classified the interaction of the gospel with Western culture into five types in his book *Christ and Culture*.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 36 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Kyoung-jae Kim, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum Publishing House, 1994), 11.

The sowing model is based on an analogy with seed and soil. In this model the good seed with the life-giving power is the Christian gospel and soil is Korean religions and cultural heritage that are filled with weeds and thistles to be negated and conquered by the Christian Gospel. “As the soil passively receives the seed, the pagan culture of the land was to passively receive the Gospel, that is, Western theology.”¹⁹

The yeast model is based on an analogy with yeast and dough. In this model the yeast is not a particular theological system or doctrine but Jesus Christ himself. The dough refers to the traditional culture and the life-situation of non-Christian Koreans. “The life-situation, in the yeast model, is stained with sin so it needs to be redeemed and renewed by Christ, yet the substance itself is looked upon as being inherently good. The present world has always been within the scope of God’s mission, and under the care and concern of God’s love.”²⁰

The converging model is a theological paradigm of Korean *Minjung* theology. This model takes as its ruling metaphor two streams coming together to form a larger river. In this model one stream is Christian teaching of good deeds for the poor and the other is the life-situation of ordinary Korean people, *Minjung*. The river is active, ongoing, and ever-changing Christian tradition and life. Kim explains, “The chief characteristic of the converging model is that it denies the gospel’s pre-eminence and its acceptance as a norm. Converging-model theologians regard the salvation experiences recorded in the scriptures as equal to the salvation experience of *minjung* in their daily

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

life. These are the same salvation events which are manifested in the ‘mission of God’.”²¹

The grafting model is the creation of a new life through the joining of two independent organic entities. Kim explains, “From the grafting model perspective the indigenous culture and traditional religions are not to be neglected or destroyed, rather they should be an active agent in receiving the gospel as a stock.”²² As an example of the grafting model he introduces a Korean theologian, Tong-Shik Rue, and his interpretation of “*Tao* and *Logos*.”

Of course, the Greek *logos* concept is not the same as that of the gospel of Jesus. Yet, for the Hellenized Christians, “*logos*” offered a horizon for them to understand the gospel. When they accepted the gospel standing on their horizon, their life was changed and the *logos* acquired another meaning. Far from the traditional sense of the word, now *logos* meant Jesus. ... We have reviewed how the *Tao* concept, which underlies the oriental thought can be appropriated as the foundation for the understanding of the scriptures. We are referring here to the horizon for the oriental understanding of the gospel. We can understand the gospel on this basis. We are not replacing *Tao* for Christ. *Tao-te-ching* cannot be the Christian scriptures. What we are saying is we should sow the seed of the gospel on the good spiritual soil we actually have. The oriental wisdom can serve for our understanding of the gospel. We are not merely saying it is helpful to understand the gospel, but rather we are affirming that we can prepare a far more positive way of understanding the gospel over against the understanding of the gospel by the Western church.”²³

Kim’s four models of relationship between Christianity and Korean traditional religious culture give new insights to Asian Christians compared to reading Richard Niebuhr’s western cultural theology. He carefully discerns Christ from Christianity or Christian doctrine and theology. He also distinguishes culture as the life situations of

²¹ Ibid., 132.

²² Ibid., 136.

²³ Tong-Shik Rue, *To woa Logos* (Tao and Logos), trans., Kyoung-jae Kim (Seoul: Gidokkyomoonwhasa, 1978), 26-27.

ordinary people in forms of religious/spiritual tradition and heritages from culture as material and rational achievement or civilization. Asian religious culture and tradition are not just objects to be conquered, changed, or transformed by the power of Christianity but as living subjects that equally contribute with the gospel to bear abundant fruit and abundant life.

C. S. Song is also one devoted theologian who has tried to find an Asian way of theology and education. He pointed out, “Resources in Asia for doing theology are unlimited. What is limited is our theological imagination. Powerful is the voice crying out of the abyss of the Asian heart, but powerless is the power of our theological imagining.”²⁴

He suggests a model of Christian theology in the multicultural world, which has five stages:

Stage One is asking a fundamental question. Asian Christians’ theological agenda is to explore “the meaning of the Cross” in Asian cultural and religious contexts. Stage two is recognizing the story of God’s reign. Asian Christians’ theological task is to build a bridge between stories outside the Christian Church and the story of Jesus.

Stage three is recognizing stories of God’s reign in Asia. To know Jesus, we need to listen to stories lived, experienced, and told by all people of God in Asia who remain outside the Christian Church. These stories can help Asian Christians’ theological efforts take root in Asian soil.

Stage four is identifying a theological problem. According to Song, salvation has replaced what Jesus meant by the reign of God as the principal concern of the early

²⁴ C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 16.

church. To be saved or not becomes the overriding theme of Christian preaching and Christian mission. The theological problem that Asian Christians face is that it is not the reign of God understood and lived by Jesus that defines what salvation means, but salvation as gaining a special privilege as Christians both on earth and in heaven that defines what the reign of God means.²⁵

Stage five is recognizing Jesus and stories of people. Asian Christians need a theological mind not prejudiced toward stories indigenous to Asia but alien to the Christian Church. It is a theological imagination that can help Christians image God and God's activity in stories. Song says, "[Yes], it is a theological conversation, but the conversation is theological because it has to do with God as well as humanity, because God is called upon to bear witness to what has been going on in the world in which human beings struggle for hope in face of hopelessness and for the meaning of life always overshadowed by death."²⁶

Song's model of doing theology in Asian contexts is a "theological feast of stories—the story of Jesus, stories from Asia, stories of God's reign."²⁷ It is not a ready-made set of doctrine or tradition but a long journey of conversation and engagement in the lives of all the people of God. He says, "In the company of this Jesus Christian theology in Asia can go a long way. With him we Christians and theologians in Asia can continue our theological journey with confidence in God who makes all things new (Rev 21:5)."²⁸

²⁵ C.S. Song, "Five Stages toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World," in *Journeys at the Margin*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, 17.

²⁶ Ibid., 20.

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

Theology in Religious Education

Religious Education is transmitting religious tradition and participating in the process of re-creation and creation of the tradition. It is not a simple act of teaching students to believe the Bible literally or to affirm “authoritative doctrine” of the West. Rather it is a dynamic structure of action and reflection on Christian tradition and culture, other religious traditions and experience, and all human experiences.

About the question of the place of theology in Christian religious education Jack Seymour and Donald Miller answer that theology is “reflection within the community of faith, seeking to understand and respond to what it means to be accepted, sent and called by God into the brokenness of the world.”²⁹ In this sense religious education is theological education and it is interpersonal relationships that center in God and permeate all personal, religious, cultural, and social activities. Its outcome is personal and communal meaning-making in a religious community and helping people participate in re-creation of their religious tradition.

Asian Christians participate not only in the process of transmitting Christian tradition to neighbors and to the next generations but also in the process of re-creation and creation of the Christian tradition with different religious experiences and understandings. Religious education is education of theological reflection in any religious community. When and where there is a division between theology and education, “the result is bad theology and bad education.”³⁰ For Asian Christians religious education is

²⁹ Jack Seymour and Donald E. Miller, “Living into a World of Confessional Pluralism,” in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Seymour and Miller, 239.

³⁰ C. S. Song, “Christian Education in a World of religious Pluralism,” in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Seymour and Miller, 170.

finding their unique tasks of how to participate in re-creation of Christian tradition and the other traditions that have shaped their lives.

The fundamental task of education is discerning God's presence and call and following God into the action of making history. "A task of religious education is to examine and understand [these] cultural processes of engaging the vision of God with the possibilities of humane experience."³¹ Tasks of religious education for Asian Christians, however, are not only engaging in public and social life and experience but also engaging in multi-religious traditions and experiences in Asian history and culture. C. S. Song asks, "How can we Christians be engaged in 'Christian nurture' in a society nurtured by other religions? How do we understand our faith—not in isolation, but taking into account other religious faiths? What is the primary content of Christian education in a religiously pluralistic situation?"³²

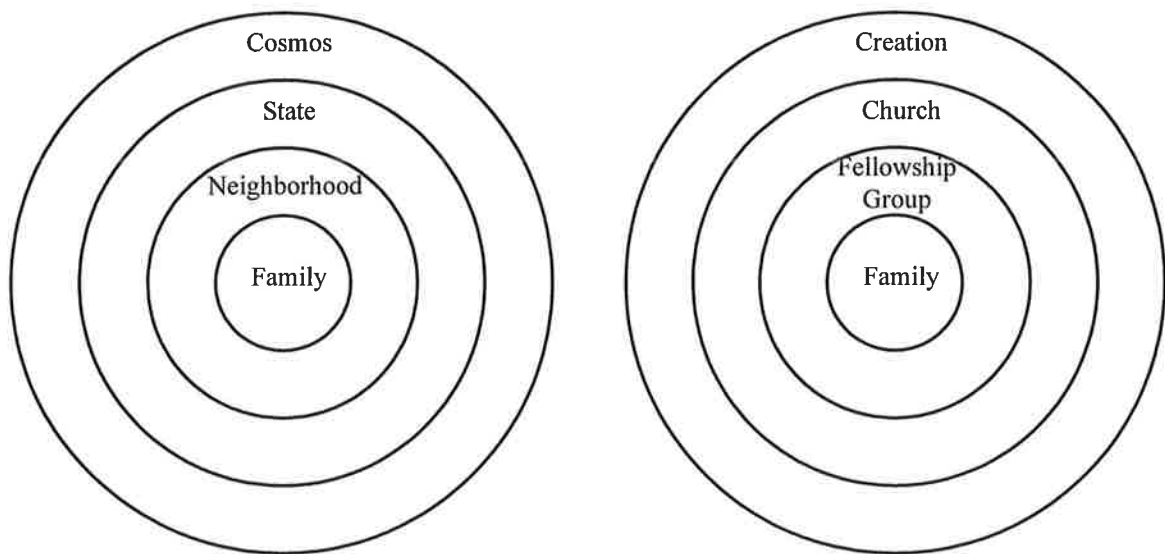
Many Asian theologians and religious educators have tried to answer these questions. In his book, *People On the Way*, a Chinese-American theologian and religious educator, David Ng, paid special attention to the issue of how the approaches to church life and educational ministry of Asian-American congregations are illumined by ancient Asian truths and religious philosophical understandings. He found that "these people of East Asian heritage understand their own personal identity to be bound with their families and other communities so that each is an interdependent person in community."³³

³¹ Seymour and Miller, "Openings to God," in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Seymour and Miller, 9.

³² C. S. Song, "Christian Education in a World of Religious Pluralism," 166.

³³ David Ng, ed., introduction to *People on the Way*, xix.

For Asian Christians their religious identity comes from their faith communities. Ng says, “This is in contrast to the approach to life and experiences of many Western people whose life goal is self-fulfillment as a free individual essentially independent of others.”³⁴ Ng develops later his model of “concentric circles of relationship” to explain how “the individual relates to family, neighborhood, state, and cosmos” in Asian culture and contexts.³⁵ He does not make a diagram explaining his model but I develop a diagram to adopt and expand his model to my study. I will use and explain later this diagram again in a bigger theological context in chapter 6.



³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See David Ng, “A Path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community” in *Journeys at the Margin*, ed. Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 85.

Asian Christians' struggle for religious identity stems from their contemporary political history too. Many Asian countries have experienced the West's colonial invasions, with which came Christianity. China had two Opium Wars with the West. "This ended in humiliating and costly defeat, and the inscrutable door was opened by force."³⁶ It was during the period of uncertainty and confusion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that many Asians received Christianity and began their struggle of religious identity. During the persecutions of 1801, 1839, 1864, and 1886 in Korea 8,000 Korean Catholics were martyred because of rigid policies of the Vatican regarding ancestor worship and the forceful evangelism of Roman Catholicism against Korea's isolation policy at that time. Vietnam was forced to receive Roman Catholicism under French occupation, and when America replaced France's forces in Vietnam in 1954 American churches and missionaries followed the American military and politics. To be a true Vietnamese, he or she should be a nationalist. Vietnamese Christians struggled between how to be a true Christian and how to be a true Vietnamese.

Educational ministry of Asian-American churches has unique issues and concerns and these issues and concerns have become an urgent agenda for the whole church today. And these issues and concerns point to the basic need of Asian Christian theology. Thus, Asian Christian theology need not become another systematic theology. According to Ng, "Theology is being written, not necessarily in a systematic way, but *in situ*—on location—addressing pertinent issues along the way."³⁷

³⁶ Stephen S. Kim, "Seeking Home in North America: Colonialism in Asia; Confrontation in North America," in *People on the Way*, ed. David Ng, 12.

³⁷ Ng, introduction to *People on the Way* xxvii.

Asian Christians are on the way of the theological journey with many questions about religious identity, meaning of salvation, ancestor worship, ethical and moral values of Christian life, and the meaning of community. I will exam the meaning of salvation, which is another issue or question that Asian Christians struggle together.

CHAPTER 3

What Will Happen to My Non-Christian

Family Members After They Die?

(Korean Congregation)

Introduction

For Asians the concept of family and community goes beyond the limit of human death. Deceased family members are still considered as family and people concern for their wellbeing. In this chapter I will study a Korean congregation that shows the main issue of the salvation of their non-Christian family members and friends.

Koreans' first contact with Roman Catholicism was at Beijing, China when some Neo-Confucian scholars visited and studied the western science in the 17th century. To Korean visitors to Beijing, the Roman Catholic Church seemed influential, so they became interested in learning more about the teaching of this new faith. When they returned home, they brought with them books that told about "the Lord of Heaven" and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Because of its prescription of ancestor worship, the Korean government operating under Confucian ideals considered Catholicism to be an "evil religion." This made Catholics appear to be unfilial and thus disloyal members of Korean society. There was severe persecution of Korean Catholics and foreign missionaries. In the year 1839, more than one hundred and thirty Korean Catholics were

executed with three foreign missionaries¹ “By 1870, over eight thousand Christians suffered martyrdom.”²

Since 1832 there were several attempts by Protestant missionaries to come to Korea but they were not successful because of the Korean Isolation policy. In 1873 two Scottish Presbyterian missionaries preached the gospel to Korean residents in the China-Korean border region. In 1876 they baptized the first Korean convert. These two missionaries with the help of a Korean interpreter translated the New Testament into Korean. In 1885 the Korean interpreter, So Sang Yun went back to his hometown, Sorae, and established a Presbyterian Church. His brother So Kyong Yun became one of the first Protestant Korean-ordained ministers.

Horace Allen, a medical missionary, successfully cured one of the king’s family members in 1883 and opened the door for more Protestant missionaries of many denominations to be allowed entrance to Korea. Kang says, “Although Protestant work was started in Korea much later than in other portions of Asia, Korea proved a greater success than other Asian missions.”³ Protestant missionaries contributed to medical needs and the education of the Korean people.

The influence of Christian education through missionary schools nurtured Korean Christian nationalism and a spirit of independence during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Korean Christians led most of the independent movements and protests against Japanese occupation. As a means of making Koreans loyal subjects, the Japanese

¹ Wi Jo Kang, *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: A History of Christianity and Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

administration began urging all Koreans to participate in Shinto ceremonies. Christians refused to participate in Shinto ceremonies. Korean Christians who had abandoned their own ancient practice of ancestor worship as idolatry were not easily convinced that paying such respect to Japanese ancestral spirits was not a religious act. Students of the mission schools led protests against Japanese control.

These Korean experiences with Christianity in their cultural and historical contexts are crucial to understanding the faith formation of Asian Christians. I first choose a Korean congregation for my study of faith formation among Asian Christians. The Korean church that I interviewed was a Korean Presbyterian Church located in Mount Prospect, Illinois, which was a Northwest suburb of Chicago. I interviewed both individual members and the pastor to collect the stories of the congregation and to find theological issues that people in the community face.

I chose to study a Korean congregation first for the following reasons:

a) Korea is the most successful Christian country in Asia in terms of numbers of Christians and Christian churches. Since Christianity came to Korea in the middle part of the 19th century (Protestant Church), in a short time the Christian church has grown rapidly. It has 20,000,000 Christians accounting for 25 percent of the whole population. It also has the five largest Protestant churches in the world. My assumption here is that Korean Christians' experiences imply many things for an understanding of my research question; why Asians believe Western Christian beliefs and how do they understand Christina faith.

³ Ibid., 29.

b) I want to start this study with my own community. My assumption here is that as a beginner of this research field, I can use my knowledge in terms of language, history, and culture for my research. Because we speak the same language I can easily observe their rituals and group dynamics and communicate with them clearly as compared to researching other cultures. But I recognize the possibility of room for error or misunderstanding because of my pre-assumption that I know them. Later when I study a Chinese congregation and a Vietnamese congregation I will be an outsider in the communities allowing for a more objective perspective.

I tried to put aside my knowledge and experiences with the Korean Christian churches in order to discover the inside view of this particular Korean faith community. Specifically, I wanted to discuss how members of this congregation feel and think about their own rituals and activities by asking them for their interpretations. But I admit that my pre-assumptions might have influenced my study. One advantage I brought to this study as an insider, however, was that I went to them with deeper questions. Because I know their general history and broader contexts I tried to provoke them with deeper questions.

Methodology

My research is divided into four phases – preparation, story collecting, analysis, and story telling. In the preparation phase, I visited several Korean churches in the greater Chicago area. I chose this congregation because it was small enough to study and consisted of first generation Korean Americans and their children who know and keep

Korean culture and traditions. Many of them are recently converted from other Asian religions. Here my assumption is that first generation immigrants struggle with the issue of the relationship between their traditional religious culture and Christianity.

After I chose the congregation, I met with the pastor of the church. It took multiple attempts to contact him, but once we made contact, he willingly supported my research. I showed him my research plan and explained why I chose this church. He recommended five names of church members for interviews, and he himself responded willingly to my request for an interview.

In the story-collecting phase, I used the data triangulation method. Data triangulation is the use of a variety of data sources in a study. I combined interviewing, observation and document analysis as story-collecting resources. The questions listed in chapter one were used for the interviews. I interviewed four members of the congregation including the pastor. I interviewed three lay members, one male and two females. Including the pastor, their ages are from the late twenties to the early fifties.

The congregation is very young and most of the members belong to this age group. With the exception of the pastor, all interviewees have had other religious experiences such as, Buddhism, Shamanism and Confucianism. I also observed the congregational life including formal rituals and informal gatherings. I observed their Sunday worship services and participated in their luncheon fellowship. Also, I gathered written documents produced and used in the congregation such as Sunday worship bulletins, newsletters, and the collection of member's Lenten spiritual journals.

Description of the Congregation

The church belongs to the Korean Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The current pastor established it approximately ten years ago. It was started with eight adults and four children; current membership is about four hundred including children and youth. Approximately one third of the membership consists of children and youth. The average age of adult members is in mid forties. Most of them are the first generation of Korean immigrants who speak Korean. The predominant occupations are small businesses such as, dry cleaner, groceries and beauty supplies.

However, this church has some young Korean-American professionals such as, dentists and medical doctors who came to America at an early age. They are the “1.5 generation.” They speak both Korean and English. This church experiences some leadership conflicts between the first generation and the 1.5 generation. One of the members I interviewed came to America when she was 15 years old. She is an art therapist and her husband is a dentist. She said,

Many of our members have small businesses and they work long hours every day. They are physically tired and don't have time to serve the church. We need better educational programs for our children but most adult members don't have time to do new ministry programs. We need more English-speaking professionals who have more time and knowledge for leadership positions. But when English speaking young professionals visit our church, they don't stay long because they don't feel comfortable here. They feel excluded here.

This church has a sanctuary, educational building, office building, fellowship hall, and a parsonage. They purchased this church facility from an American Baptist Church

about five years ago. The sanctuary has no decorations or symbols except a big cross on the center of the front wall. There is a baptismal font under the cross. The windows have plain glasses and curtains and no stained glass. There is a piano and an old organ.

They have three worship services on Sunday mornings. The first is at 8:30 AM for Sunday school teachers who are teaching Sunday school later as well as for members who open their small businesses on Sundays. All Sunday school teachers are expected to attend this service before they teach Sunday school. The second service is at 9:30 AM for English speaking members including youth. This service is a contemporary service utilizing a band. The third service is at 11 AM. This is their largest service. The service starts with choir's musical introit from the balcony of the sanctuary. The pastor and choir process from the narthex to the altar. The pastor faces the cross to lead the call to worship and prayer of invocation. Included in the weekly worship service are: hymns, prayer for confession, and reciting of Apostles' creed. Confessional prayer is a silent prayer and one of lay leaders leads the congregational prayer after the silent prayer.

The pastor identifies this church as "the church who prays constantly" in the pastoral prayer of Sunday worship. There is one Bible reading, special music by the choir, a sermon, offering, announcements, and benediction. Worship flows well and people who lead the worship seem to know the flow and work together cooperatively. During our interview the pastor stated, "The flow of the worship is very important. Worship services need both intellectual activities such as Bible readings and sermon and emotional touches such as music and praise. I think emotional experience during worship

services is very important for the members' spiritual life. Sometimes I change hymns during worship service to fit the day's worship flow."

The classrooms in the educational building have some decorations and children's pictures, but the most dominant things in the classrooms are Bibles and textbooks of Korean language. After Sunday school they offer Korean classes teaching the Korean language and culture. Children learn the Bible and Korean heritage in this church.

Though it is a Presbyterian Church, it doesn't yet have elders. It has four probational elders who were recently elected and twenty-two deacons. The top administration group of the congregation is the association of deacons and probational elders. The group makes most of the important decisions of the church. There are also several committees such as, Education, Mission, and Finance.

They have many fellowship groups that are important units in the life of the church. Fellowship groups are divided by age. The young adult group is for members in their twenties. Also, there are fellowship groups for age thirties, forties, fifties, and older than sixties. Each fellowship group meets after Sunday worship service in fellowship hall as well as a weekly gathering at a member's house. Fellowship groups serve many functions. They are units for Bible study, prayer and fellowship. The pastor communicates with members through the fellowship groups, and members participate in and support the church activities through the groups. One member said, "Most other Korean churches have fellowship groups too, but ours are somehow unique. We share more intimacy than usual church fellowship groups. Once people come to church they are doing something by ages in their fellowship groups not by families. Through those

fellowship groups people make friends around their ages including children and youth and they share their faith and lives. This church provides those opportunities intentionally.”

This church has Bible school for adult members on weekdays. There are four Bible classes every semester, which has one or two credits. When one finishes twenty credits, they earn a Laity Bible degree. This church has a prayer service every morning from 6:00 AM to 7:00 AM year round. When I visited the morning prayer service it was winter and very dark. Sacred music filled the sanctuary prior to the service. At six o'clock the music ended and the pastor greeted people with a Bible passage. Together they sang a hymn and read a Bible passage. The pastor gave a brief sermon on the passage. They sang another hymn and the pastor presented three prayer subjects to the church. All people prayed together for these subjects. They called it “tong-sung gido” meaning praying in one voice together loudly. After the “tong-sung gido” people had free time for personal prayers. Some people sat on the floor and some people knelt before the altar, while others stayed in their pews. Some people spoke in tongues but they did not disturb others. Some people were sniffing and mumbling with wet voices in their prayer. They appeared to be sharing an intimate time with God.

Themes of Stories of the Church

Many important themes emerged in this congregation. The first and most frequently voiced theme is “*faith is experiencing God₂*” rather than relying solely on

Christian doctrine. This theme was repeated in the interviews with members and with the pastor as well as in the Sunday worship service and prayer service. Though the ways they experience God are different for each individual, people of this congregation define, “Christian faith is experiencing of God.” Some people experience God “through prayer” or “singing hymns or gospel songs” and some people experience God through “feeling a warm heart when I study the Bible.”

When I asked the pastor how he and this congregation relate to God, he answered, “prayer is the only way we depend on God and ask his guidance. I started this church with prayer. Because I believed that I had God’s answer and guidance in my prayer, I started this church. Prayer is communicating with God, and through prayers we experience God. This theme echoed among lay people I interviewed. When I asked Misook, a female member who was born in a Buddhist family in Korea, “How did you start to go to this church?” she answered, “There is a difference between “When I started to go to church” and “When I began to have a relationship with God.” She explained, “I had a friend who attended a Christian school. One day when I was in a senior in High School, she brought me to her church. That was the first time I went to church. But that does not mean I had Christian faith at that time. I just attended a church.”

Her home church had a big youth group and sometimes they had gospel song concerts as part of their evangelism. One day when she sang those songs in a gospel concert, she felt her heart became warm and experienced God’s presence within her. After that experience she started to attend a morning prayer service with her friends and she kept growing in her relationship with God. She said, “It was hard to keep praying

every morning but I felt God's presence and when we prayed together and I had joy in Christian life. When I sang the gospel song, "I chose you;" I really felt I was chosen by God."

Another member, Youngmi, who transferred from the Catholic Church, explained the reason why she came to this church. She said she didn't experience feeling a personal touch with God in the Catholic Church. She said, "I attended a church and I believed in God who created everything including me. That was it. That was an 'understanding of God' not 'faith in God.'" In this church she attends Bible study and she experiences personal growth in faith. She said, "I experience God's grace in Bible study. Whenever I discover the meaning of God's word in the Bible, I feel God's presence and guidance in my life." To the people of this church believing is experiencing. The religious experiences they have through prayer, praising, and Bible studies leads them to Christian life.

Along with the theme, "Faith is experiencing God," there is the second theme. The second theme is "*salvation of God is revealed only in Jesus Christ.*" The reason they become Christians and stick to Christianity is God's salvation. They are very clear about it. When I asked the pastor about their mission statement or slogan, he said, "Our on-going mission slogan is that we are the church who spreads God's salvation to the world." This church emphasizes evangelism and spends twenty five percent of their budget to support missionaries and mission works around the world.

Youngmi said, “Some Christians think the mission of the church in the world is to fulfill the needs of the world. But we believe the mission of our church is spread the salvation of God. That’s why we don’t have many social programs. We focus on worship services, Bible studies and prayers. Among all of them worship is the center. Worship is not formality. Worship is expressing our joy of salvation.” For them, Jesus is “the Lamb of God,” “the true Savior,” and/or “the channel between God and those who brings God’s salvation.” They believe that they obtain “real truth” in Christian faith because Jesus is the Savior.

The third theme of this congregation is “*showing good examples as Christians.*” When I asked interviewees why they chose this congregation as their faith community two of them, Misook and Junyoung, answered they liked the warmth of the church. One of them said, “When I visited this church for the first time my first impression is ‘this is a very young and warm church.’ Since I got to know the pastor and members of this church I was convinced that they were very honest and humble. I thought that if I followed or imitated their Christian life styles I would become a good Christian too.” I asked her what she meant by “showing good example as Christians.” She said, “The Pastor teaches us often to be meek and humble Christians. I think being humble is the basic value and attitude of Christians. And there is trusting and intimacy among members. I feel it.”

I asked interviewees about any significant people who have been influential to their faith journey. Misook said, “I have a good friend in this church. We pray together sometimes and share our concerns. But the real reason I like her is that she is very

honest. I think if Christians are not honest, they cannot be trusted.” The pastor has the same opinion about how to influence this congregation. He said, “I try to show an example of Christian life. Pastors’ role is not only preaching the gospel but also practicing Jesus’ teaching in their lives. I try hard to learn and practice the spiritual authority that Jesus teaches in the gospel.”

The last theme of this congregation is that *Confucian value of family overrides individuals’ faith decision*. When there are religious conflicts in their families, Confucian values of the families override individual’s faith. Youngmi, one of interviewees, was transferred from a Catholic Church but she was originally from a Confucius family. I asked her how she became a Catholic and again become a Protestant member. Her religious journey shows how Confucian value of family has led her religious journey. She said,

I was born in a very strict Confucius family. My family had ancestor worship services every month. We kept eight generations of ancestors in our worship. But one day my grand father became very ill. We prayed according to our religion but he was not getting better. One neighbor who was a Christian introduced us to a Christian doctor and she prayed for our grand father. Finally my grand father was healed and he decided to convert to Christianity but he wanted to keep ancestor worship. In Korean the Catholic Church at that time allowed Catholic version of ancestor worship but Protestant Church didn’t allow any kind of ancestor worship. My grand father decided to convert to Catholic that allowed ancestor worship. Once he converted to Catholic my whole family followed his decision because he was the head of family. That’s how I became a Catholic. At that time my mother told me that I had to follow my husband’s religion when I marry. I married my husband who grew up in a Protestant Christian family and I became a Protestant member. Before I married I went to Catholic Church with my family and after I married I went to the Protestant church with my husband’s family. I just followed them. I didn’t have my personal faith.

Another member, Misook, shared stories of her grandmother whom, as a Christian, had to hide her Christian faith in her Buddhist family. Her grandmother could not go to a church because of her husband's anger and she prayed and read the Bible by herself at home early in the mornings while the whole family still slept. Misook became a Christian due to the influence of her grandmother but she married a non-Christian husband. She tried hard to convert her husband and his family. She said, "Now I am proud of my self as a Christian because I brought my father-in law and my husband to God. It took a long time and many prayers but finally they now believe in God. I felt my Christian faith was meaningless unless my family accepted it."

Interpretation of the Themes

The first interpretation is that *Korean Christians who are from multi-religious environments have a strong consciousness about being Christians because of their conversion experiences. For them Christian faith is experiencing God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and their faith is shared with others through witnessing to their experience. Thus, testimonies are an important part of their faith journey.* Christians who are converted from or grew up in a multi-religious environment often experience strong moments of shifting their whole life paradigm. Because of those experiences they have a strong consciousness about being Christians and want to keep perspective in-touch with the Spirit that they received with their first conversion experiences.

In his book, *The transforming Moment*, James Loder insists, "Theology, in contrast to the human sciences, has concentrated on what to believe and it has paid

relatively less attention to how one comes to believe what is theologically sound.”⁴ He explains humans come to believe what is theologically sound when they experience a crucial point when the person him or herself breaks into a new order of reality.⁵ He calls these experiences “signs of the presence of the kingdom of God” under the category of biblical theology.

He says, “Theologically we may speak of such experiences as ‘conversions’ in which a person converts from paganism to Christianity...A better term may be ‘metanoia,’ the notion used by H. Richard Niebuhr to describe the ‘permanent revolution’ or the ongoing transformation of human life under divine initiative.”⁶ When people experience conversion or metanoia, “Serenity comes up out of anxiety, joy out of depression, hope out of hopelessness; good is returned for evil, forgiveness replaces retaliation, and courage triumphs over fear, then we recognize the movement of something beyond the personality and mental health.”⁷

People in the Korean congregation expressed the same experiences that Loder addresses regarding how people believe what is theologically sound. When they narrated their faith journey, members of this congregation stated strong contrasts between pre-Christian experiences and post-Christian experiences or between the time when they first experienced God in the Holy Spirit and after those experiences. The shifting moments take place in their belief systems, emotional experiences, and the purpose of their lives.

⁴ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

They are aware of and concerned about why they chose the Christian faith and what they believe as Christians. Also, they are aware of how they are different since they have come to experience God personally.

However, their metanoia experience is different from Loder's concept of turning to God from "void" or Niebuhr's concept of returning from sin of pride. Even before they join the Christian Church they have had religious experiences and practices of Confucianism or Taoism or Buddhism. They could not find religious satisfaction in their traditional religions but their religious minds were not empty or void. Kim, Kyoung Jae explains,

From the cultural religious perspective, the religious soil of Korea was fertile ground into which gospel seeds could be sown and nurtured....[T]hought of Mahayana Buddhism of Korea, the religious philosophy of Confucianism, waiting on *Chun-ju* belief of *Tonghak*, and even the demonology of shamanism, all of these served as the ground for the hermeneutical pre-understanding of the Korean people enabling them to receive the gospel. Even Korean biblical terms like the Holy Spirit, salvation, redemption, repentance, rebirth, heaven, mind, and power are all easily understood in the context of religious usage throughout Korean religious history.⁸

Kim insists, "The Korean Protestants accepted Jesus of Nazareth whom the Bible proclaims as the Christ. The Korean Protestants see a new salvation paradigm in Jesus Christ who manifests the cosmic and universal Ultimate Reality through, in, and by his transparent existence." I heard often in my interviews that Korean Christians' claim, "Salvation only in and through Jesus Christ." They have had metanoia experience as experiencing a different paradigm of salvation in the gospel from their traditional

⁸ Kyoung-jae Kim, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions*, 118.

religions. Their main theological concern is not sin as finite humans' pride against infinite God because they have known and worshiped the Transcendent God (T'ien or Tao) in their traditional religions. They are more concerned with a theological explanation of how to resolve the pain of the victims of sin. Andrew S. Park, a Korean theologian, says, "The doctrine of *repentance*, which has focused on the sinner/oppressor, will be complemented with the doctrine of *forgiveness* which is for the victim/oppressed."⁹

The second interpretation is that *faith is formed and nurtured in the dynamics of the relationships between individual experiences and communal experiences or individuality and communality. They cannot be separated in the understanding of faith. There are dynamics between them.* Existing faith formation theories have emphasized either individual experiences or communal experiences. James Fowler approaches faith formation from individuals' cognitive and psychological development experiences. John Westerhoff III approaches faith formation and nurture from faith community's enculturation experiences.

The stories of the Korean congregation, however, show that faith formation and nurture take place both in individuals and the communities that they belong to and have experience with. They may experience changing moments in their individual encounters of God's presence, but they may find answers for their individual longings of life and faith in their faith communities. The communities are fellowship gatherings, church

⁹ Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13 (emphasis in original).

worship services, and/or prayer services. They nurture their faith together through studying the Bible, prayer, witness, and hearing the message. All of these take place in the dynamics between individual experiences and communal experiences. They study the Bible at home, and pray individually whenever they have difficulties. But they also willingly share their understandings of the Bible with others in communal study. They pray together whenever they gather together and share their concerns for each other. They also edify common communities, such as the church and its' mission activities, and their home country, Korea.

They are also willing to witness to each other sharing Christian faith with joy in God that they experience individually. Whatever they do to nurture their faith, they share these nurturing experiences with others in their faith community. Individual longing for faith is provoked, answered and grown in communities. Individuals and communities do not consume each other. They have a function to support each other in faith formation and nurture.

For them God is Father. The Father, however, is not only the individual family's father but also the community's father like their ancestors. They meet and experience the Father individually but they share the same Father with others in community. Because they share the same faith in the same Father, they care for each other's faith formation and nurture. They even invite others to their home for studying the Bible, prayer, witness and fellowship though they meet every Sunday at the church.

The third interpretation is that *the traditional family value - Confucius Filial Piety – sometimes overrides or conflicts with Christian values of egalitarianism or equality among family members but at the same time the traditional family values promote eager evangelism to their family members*. When the head of a household (grandfather, father or husband) converts to Christianity in a Korean family, all family members are likely to follow his decision. Most often daughters are taught to follow their husband's religions when they marry. It is one of Confucian "Three Bonds (*Sam-gang*)" teaching. The "Three Bonds" are those binding the ruler with the minister, the father with the son, and the husband with the wife. In this situation individual family members have not been expected to develop individuality in their faith. When a member, not the head, of the household converts to Christianity the member brings conflicts to the family.

In the Confucian culture, family relationships are at the core of the well-known "Five Human Relations (*Wu-Lun*)" -- the ruler-minister relationship, father-son relationship, husband-wife relationship, elder-younger brother relationship, and friend-friend relationship. According to Julia Ching, "Confucian influence is especially discerned in the Korean emphasis on filial piety, shown also in ritual mourning for the dead—a reason why Koreans had traditionally preferred to wear white (the color of mourning in East Asia), since they were always mourning for some member of the large, extended family."¹⁰ Filial piety has functioned primarily as an ethico-religious symbol in Confucian Korean culture. According to Tu Wei-Ming "a filial son is likely to be

¹⁰ Kūng and Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, 82.

watchful over his personal conduct, conscientious about affairs, responsive to social obligations and, as a result, qualified for political assignments.”¹¹

There is a case study about how families react when their members become ordained monks or nuns of Buddhist monasteries in Korea.¹² In the study seventy percent of the interviewed (90 out of 128) indicate that they are in the monastery against the wishes of their families and have brought conflict to their families. Their family members consider them to be abandoning duties of Filial Piety not only to their living parents but also to their deceased ancestors because they do not marry and have children for the future of family nor do they participate in family ancestor worship. In studying family and religion in Korea, Kwang Kue Lee, concludes, “Filial piety and ancestor worship were the most important duties of offspring...In a word, religion in Korea has been characterized as a family religion.”¹³

Similar conflicts occur with Christian converts. When a member of a family converts to Christianity the member is still expected to adhere to the Confucian cultural expectations and practices. Even when a whole family converts to Christianity the family is run by Confucian cultural expectations of family relationships. When women marry they are expected to follow their husband’s religion. Children are expected to fulfill parents’ religious wishes. In many cases ordained pastors in Korean churches became pastors to fulfill their parents wish rather than following their own calling.

¹¹ Wei-Ming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 41.

¹² See L. R. Lancaster, “Buddhism and Family,” in *Religion and the Family in East Asia*, ed. George De Vos and Takao Sofue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 139-51.

¹³ Kwang Kue Lee, “Family and Religion in Traditional and Contemporary Korea,” in *Religion and the Family in East Asia*, ed. George De Vos and Takao Sofue, 198.

An American missionary who studied the Korean family system says,

My wife, Char, and I served as missionaries to Korea with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel from 1973 through 1986. We had been there but a few months when it became apparent that what we were teaching regarding our understanding of biblical order for the family was finding only limited acceptance. On one occasion my wife was asked to teach a series on Christian family only to have the series canceled after the first session. On another, a gentleman stood up in a Bible study I was conducting and testified to his joy upon hearing my teaching from Genesis chapter two concerning consideration for one's wife. Within several months, however, he rejected the teaching and discontinued attending our church. Over the years we served there, it became increasingly clear that a strong traditional ideology, deeply imbedded in the Korean psyche, was hindering many from enjoying friendship in marriage.¹⁴

On one hand traditional family values conflict with Christian value or beliefs but on the other hand those traditional values promote Korean Christians' devotion to evangelize to their non-Christian family members. Because of their concerns for family members' well-being, not only in this world but also in the life after death, their primary issue of Christian faith is to evangelize to their family members. They worry that their non-Christian family members cannot go to heaven (salvation) and will become ghosts who are wandering in the living people's world. In the mixture of Shamanism and Confucianism, Koreans believe that deceased family members can become hovering ghosts when living members do not take care of them properly.

Concern for salvation of non-Christian family member's is the largest theological issue among Korean Christians. They question, "What will happen to my non-Christian family members when they die?" This issue has not been addressed properly in Korean

churches. Asian Christians in general and specifically Korean Christians have strong consciousness about being Christians. They consciously distinguish their Christian belief about life after death from any Asian religious beliefs. They believe that salvation is only in and through Christ. Because of their strong belief in an Augustinian understanding of salvation, they struggle with the question of non-Christian family members' salvation.

On one hand both Korean indigenous theology, which emphasizes reinterpretation of Christian doctrine on the basis of Korean traditional religions and Korean Minjung theology, which emphasizes political and economic liberation of the poor do not provide appropriate theological explanation of the scope and meaning of Christian salvation. On the other hand, western pluralism which holds that all the religious traditions of humanity are equally valid paths to the same core of religious reality, cannot be accepted by most Korean Christians because the reason they converted to Christianity was to seek a different salvation paradigm in the gospel than of traditional religions. Inclusive pluralism sounds too much like Buddhism or Taoism. Thus, the only option that they have is to evangelize their non-Christian family members before they die. Their concern for the well-being of family or Confucian family value of Filial Piety promotes their motivation to evangelize to their families.

¹⁴ Ronald Roy Meyers, *An Analysis of the Confucian Marriage and Family System in Modern Korea and a Christian Alternative*, Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993), xii.

CHAPTER 4

With What Understandings

Do I Participate in Ancestor Worship of My Family?

(Chinese Congregation)

Introduction

For Asian Christians the concept of family is still opened to their deceased ancestors. As they bow to each other to greet they bow to their ancestors to greet and to show their respects. But it has been a difficult theological and religious educational issue among Asian Christians. In this chapter I will study a Chinese congregation, which has main issue of ancestor worship.

Christianity reached China as early as the seventh century by Syrian Nestorians at the height of the Tang dynasty. They came to China as religious refugees and did not leave a lasting religious influence with the Chinese people. With the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century the Franciscan and Dominican missionaries came to China. Because of the *Pax Mongolica* that made it possible for China and foreign traders to have direct contracts by land via the Silk Route of caravans, Christianity came to China from foreign lands through international trade and science. But with the fall of Yuan dynasty Christian activity in China ceased for the second time. K. K. Yeo explains the reasons for the failure of Franciscan mission in China.

First, the Franciscans did not adequately understand and deal constructively with Chinese veneration of ancestors, and the Confucian ethics of family, and the Chinese worldview. Second, the Franciscans failed to work with Chinese converts

to devise patterns of Christian faith sensitive to Chinese customs and in the indigenous Chinese languages. Third, the Franciscans took the side of the foreign merchant class in the wake of the Mongol conquest. All in all, the Franciscan mission was not one of contextualization. The Franciscans proselytized the Chinese by teaching them to embrace Western Catholic culture.¹

Two hundred years later another attempt was made by the Jesuits. In 1583 a permanent Jesuit residence was established at a small city not far from Canton. In 1685 other Roman Catholic orders entered China with the Spanish and French. A native Chinese was consecrated as a bishop. Despite their effort the growth was not rapid. One of the elements that contributed to the retarded growth was what has become known as the “Rite controversy.” As the dispute grew in intensity, appeals were made to Rome. In 1704 the pope dispatched a special representative to China to seek a solution. The dispute, which lasted the better part of a century, concerned issues, which are still relevant today. K. K. Yeo claims, “The fate of Christianity in China has long depended on how it interacts with Confucian ethics. Two major issues in the Rites Controversy concerned veneration of Confucius and ancestors and the naming of God.”²

The first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, arrived in Canton in 1807. Sixteen years after his arrival, Morrison completed the translation of the Old and New Testaments with some help from his colleague William Milne.³ Since then Western Christianity has entered through various avenues: missionary envoys, political treaties,

1 K. K. Yeo, “Cruciform Love and Dao De: Paul’s Ethic of Holiness and Chinese Morality of Ren Ren,” unpublished paper, lecture in course on Systemic Theology, Northern Baptist Seminary, Lombard, Ill., Fall 2002, 4.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Thompson Brown, *Christianity in the People’s Republic of China*, rev.ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 23.

military aggression, as well as social welfare to the poor, illiterate, and victims of the wars. In these encounters, Western Christians were often not able to differentiate their theology from the wider cultural context of world politics and western imperialism. As a result, the Chinese were often confused or suspicious about the intention of Christian proclamation from the West.

These Chinese experiences with Christianity in their cultural, religious, historical contexts are important for the understanding of Asian Christians' faith formation. I chose one Chinese congregation for my study. The church is a Southern Baptist church located in Claremont, CA. The reasons I chose a Chinese congregation and its members are the following: (1) Chinese culture and its philosophy, world-view and religions have had a major influence in most Asian countries. My assumption here is that Chinese Christians' experiences imply many things for an understanding of Asian Christians.

(2) The second reason that I chose a Chinese congregation is that I want to study a different community from my own while sharing many significant commonalities. My assumption here is that an outsider to the community can have more objective perspectives. But I admit that there might be the opportunity to misunderstand them because I am an outsider. One of the difficulties I had as an outsider was language. The language of the community is mandarin. When each member communicated with me, we spoke in English. But English is not a native language for either myself or the interviewees. Also, when I observed their community life – worship, fellowship, and

Sunday school -- I had to depend on my feeling sensors. Because I could not understand their language, I had to rely on my feelings or imagination.

Though I tried to discover the inside view of the community regarding how members of this community feel and think about their own ritual and activities by asking them for their interpretation, I admit that my imagination or pre-assumptions might have influenced my study. One advantage I brought to this study as an outsider, however, was that I went to them with great respect. Because I do not know their language, I tried to listen to them with respect and care.

Before I chose this congregation I visited several Chinese churches in the Los Angeles area and Chicago areas. I chose one of them because it was small enough to study and consisted of first generation Chinese Americans who recently converted from other Asian religions. My assumption again is that first generation immigrants struggle with the issue of the relationship between their traditional religious culture and Christianity. After I chose the congregation, I met the pastor of the church. I shared with him my research plan and explained why I chose his church.

I also observed the congregation's life including formal rituals and informal gatherings. I observed their Sunday worship service and participated in their luncheon fellowship. I interviewed four members of the congregation including the pastor. I interviewed three lay members, one male and two females. Including the pastor, their age ranges from the late twenties to the late forties. The congregation is very young and most of the members belong to this age group. All interviewees are recent converts to

Christianity except the pastor. The two female members I interviewed have converted from Buddhism and the one male member claimed that he was an atheist because he grew up in communist China. Also, I gathered written documents produced and used in the congregation such as Sunday worship bulletins and newsletters. When I interviewed them I asked the same questions that I used in the study of the Korean church.

Description of the Congregation

The church was established eleven years ago by the pastor whom I interviewed and now has 35 to 40 adult members and 13 to 18 children and 9 youth. Most members came to America as college or graduate students. After they graduated, they got jobs and married and decided to stay in America. Most of them became Christians through campus ministries when they attended school. The average age of members is in the thirties. Because the members are young there are many children and youth.

Most members live within 20 minutes driving distance from the church. The pastor emphasizes that the church is a local church. He says, “in the Southern Baptist church our purpose is to become a local church. We try to reach out to the local area.” Because the church is located in a college town, the church tries to reach out to young students or recent graduates. The congregation shares the church building with an Anglo-American church, which is also a Baptist church. The church has one sanctuary, several classrooms, a kitchen and a large fellowship room. The sanctuary has no decorations or symbols except a big cross on the center of the front wall. There is a baptismal font right

under the cross. The windows have plain glass and curtains; there is no stained glass. There is one piano and no organ.

Sunday worship service was led by two lay members, one of them led words in the worship and the other led music, the singing of hymns. The pastor only did the preaching. Neither the lay leaders nor the pastor wore robes. The worship started with silent meditation and prayer. They sang many praise hymns. Sometimes the church choir sings in the worship service but not every Sunday. The Sunday I attended, there was no choir. When I asked the pastor whether music or choir is important or not he answered that praise is extremely important. He explained, however, that praising together as a congregation is more important than listening to the choir. That is why the church choir does not sing every Sunday. Instead, he explained, the congregation sings more hymns or fellowship groups sing for the worship service sometimes. Though I did not understand their language, I felt familiar with their singing of hymns. The hymns the congregation sang the day I participated were well-known, slow tempo hymns such as “the Old Rugged Cross,” and “Amazing Grace.”

The classrooms have some decorations but the most dominant things in the classrooms are big flyers for evangelical gatherings. When I was there, some flyers announced the Southern Baptist Church’s national event of mission for China and some other flyers announced evangelical gatherings taking place in local churches. The worship service lasted about two hours. The pastor’s sermon appeared to be the most important part of worship, because it took the longest amount of time. The

Announcement time also seemed important. A lay worship leader took a long time to share each member's news and to gather prayer requests. After the announcements, all participants of the worship were divided by groups, which consisted of three members. Each group of three people prayed together for one another in the group and for other church members. They also prayed for their church and their country, China. After the group prayer, the worship service was closed with the doxology and the pastor's benediction.

The only administrative body the congregation has is the church council, which consists of six lay members. The council makes the important decisions of the church. The church has four fellowship groups and they are important units in the church life and administration. Fellowship groups are divided by member's backgrounds. One group has members only from mainland China, and another group has mixed members from mainland China, Hong King and South Asia such as Vietnam and Thailand. The third group has members only from Taiwan. The last group is the youth group.

Lay members are very active in the church life. They lead worship services and organize church activities and events. Also, lay members serve as Sunday school teachers. The Sunday school has two adult classes and two children's classes. Sunday school starts before the worship service. In the Sunday school classes both adults and children learn about basic Christian beliefs and doctrine and they study the Bible. The church runs an afternoon school for members' children. They teach Mandarin language

for second generation Chinese-Americans. There is also a prayer meeting every Wednesday night. They pray for the church, its members and the China mission.

Themes of the Stories of the Church

Many important themes emerged in this congregation. The first and most frequently voiced theme is “*Jesus changes my life.*” I interviewed the pastor of the church first followed by interviews with the lay members, but the theme “Jesus changes my life” echoes from the pastor to each member I interviewed. When I asked the pastor, “As a pastor, what do you try to teach the congregation? What is most important?” Without taking time to think, he answered, “the most important thing is that Jesus changes our lives.” He added,

As a church leader, I believe that they need this kind of life changing experience. If they don’t have this experience, they know Jesus only in their knowledge and in their thinking. Then, they cannot believe in Jesus. If they have this experience, they know that Jesus really changes our lives. This is the most important theme. When they experience that Jesus changes their lives, then they change their minds.

Tom, one of interviewees describes his conversion experience as a rebirth experience. He participated in an evangelical meeting at the invitation of a friend, and he and his wife decided to be baptized at the very first meeting. He says, “the meeting opened my heart. I felt that I saw light. At the evangelical meeting, I told my wife, ‘This is it’ and we decided to be baptized on that day. So we became Christians. I was reborn. I became a born-again Christian.” And then, he describes how he knows God’s presence

with him. He says, “I know God is with me, because I am happy and peaceful in my heart, with joy too. I have never felt such peace before. God must be with me.”

Chu, a female interviewee, described how she decided to be baptized through her conversion experience. She was a college student and struggled with many difficulties as a foreign student in a strange country. She was invited to the church by other students and participated in this church for several months just for the fun – meeting other Chinese friends, and eating Chinese food etc. She says, “One day when I sang a hymn in the worship service, I felt I wanted to accept Jesus as my savior. I just cried a lot, but I was so happy. That is impossible in my life to feel so peaceful. People in the church, the pastor, and teachers, all of them gave me a new life. If I look back on my past, now I am totally different. I feel that I am a totally different person.” The theme, “Jesus changes my life,” was repeated continually in many different forms in each interviewee’s story of their faith journey.

Along with the theme, “Jesus changes my life,” there is one related theme. The theme is *experiencing changes in relationships*. All of the people I interviewed appreciated their changed relationships with other people, and themselves. They especially emphasized the experience of peace, happiness or joy in their relationships. Tom said, “I am reconciled with God. Now I know who God is and who I am. I make reconciliation with God, with my self and with other people. Before I became a Christian, I was not happy. I had many conflicts. But now I have become a happy man.” Sandy, a female interviewee, said,

Before I became a Christian I was so selfish. No one was important to me, even my parents. I didn't allow anyone to control me or teach me. I could do everything by myself. Now the Lord is the most important. . . My heart is so peaceful. The Lord gives me real peace, a peaceful heart. Now I appreciate everyone for everything.

The second theme of this congregation is *discipleship*. The pastor emphasizes the importance of knowing what Christians believe. He explains the importance of discipleship by contrasting his own experience when he was in Taiwan against his experience now in America. He says,

When I was young in Taiwan my whole family went to church but we didn't know the details of Christianity. We had faith, but the faith was only traditional. It was family culture. But since I came to America, everything has changed. Now I know very clearly what I believe. The members of church are disciples. They don't want to be trained. But they need to learn more details about Christian beliefs. They need more discipleship. They need more knowledge about the Bible.

Most church activities are centered on discipleship training. Whenever they gather, or for whatever reason they gather, they study the Bible, pray together, and share testimonies. Tom emphasizes bible study as his most significant experience after he became a Christian. He said,

After I was baptized, I spent lots of time studying the Bible. I bought audio bible tapes in English, Chinese, and Spanish. Probably, I listened to some of them more than ten times. After I finished listening to all Bible tapes three or four times, I memorized verses and chapters. Also, in my Bible study group, I spent one entire year to study one book in the Bible, gospel of Matthew. We studied word by word and verse by verse. The greatest uplift experience in my spiritual life was from that Bible study. Now I know lots of things, the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and also his second coming.

Chu emphasizes how much prayer is important in her Christian life. She explains how she overcame difficulties through prayer when her family disagreed with her Christian faith and her marriage with a Christian. She says,

My husband and I just prayed a lot. When we prayed everything was changed peacefully. The point is prayer. We told the Lord what we wanted. Finally, both families accepted us and we married at a church. I believe that we could marry because of our faith. We trust the Lord. . . I believe that all about faith is prayer.

Members of this congregation share witnesses willingly and joyfully tell how they practice Christian faith in their daily life, and what they learn in Bible study and prayers. They also invite new friends and neighbors to their gatherings and share the witnesses. They believe that testimony or witnessing has the power to renew and revive people.

The third theme of this congregation is *gatherings*. This congregation has many regular gatherings and members like to gather together for a variety of purposes. The church has four fellowship groups and all members belong to one of them. All church activities are organized by and through these fellowship groups. Also, members participate in church life through participating in their fellowship groups. Tom said,

Both my wife and I are Sunday school teachers. Both of us have full time jobs and we have three children. Though our life is so busy, we do not miss Friday fellowship gatherings. That gathering is an important part of our lives. We study the Bible, pray for each other and eat dinner together. Sometimes we invite new friends to this meeting. We provide them with food and God's word.

After Sunday worship service they gather for a small luncheon. Members prepare food and eat together with joyful conversations. Every Wednesday night they gather for a prayer meeting. Some Saturdays they have evangelism gatherings. They invite

evangelists and listen to them and learn from them. Sometimes as their campus ministry they have witness gatherings for Chinese college students attending in neighboring colleges.

Along with fellowship gatherings, they think family is an important unit of their Christian life. When I asked interviewees which ritual or ceremony is most important in this congregation, Sandy pointed to the wedding ceremony. The pastor and the couple who will marry take six months for pre-marital counseling. The pastor gives them the opportunity to know each other better, and teaches them from what the Bible says about marriage and to how to handle the family economy. Sandy said,

My husband, Samson, is a blessing from God. Before I became a Christian, I didn't want to get married. I didn't want to be a wife, may be I wanted to have a boy friend. I never thought I would become a housewife. Now I love my husband, Samson, because the Lord teaches me to love my husband with true love.

The pastor sees that when each family becomes stronger the church also gets stronger. He also sees the church itself as a spiritual family.

The fourth theme is that *various communities are interrelated tightly and they form the molds of peoples' faith formation*. This theme is more implicit than other themes. Their faith is formed and sustained in many communities that have the same center. In the very center there are families. The next community, which they participate in and are concerned for is fellowship groups of the church. The next community is their local church. The next community they participate in is their denomination, the Southern Baptist Church. The last communities they are concerned about are their home countries that they left behind. All these communities are important in their Christian life.

As I said above, they believe the family is the most important unit in Christian lives. Fellowship groups are valued as very important units for their Christian lives. As a local church, they have a strong bond and loyalty to their denomination. They participate in denominational activities and events. Also, they are very concerned about their own home countries that they have left. Whenever they gather for prayer, they pray for China and Taiwan. It is one of the most repeated prayer themes in their common and personal prayers.

Also, I think there is one invisible community they are concerned about. The invisible community is that of their ancestors. Most of the members of the church were converted from Buddhism or Confucianism and try to create new ways to keep a relationship with their ancestors in their Christian faith. They are concerned about how to relate with and respect their ancestors. One member said,

I don't think we do not respect our ancestors even though we do not do ancestor worship. We can take other actions. We just keep silent and talk to our ancestors. We can respect our ancestors from our heart, true heart. It is not a matter of action. Even though Christians do not do the same actions as other people, we still respect our ancestors. We still respect them in our hearts and remember good things about them. I don't think we don't love them less or disobey them. It is totally different but other people do not understand our meaning.

Interpretation of the Themes

Now I will interpret the themes that I have discussed. The interpretations are focused on the dynamics of this faith community particularly in relation to their Asian religious/cultural background and Christian faith formation. The first interpretation is that *they have a strong consciousness about being Christians not only in multi-religious*

contexts but also in the social context of Communism. Chinese Christians who are converted from or grew up in a multi-religious environment and have communism experience have a strong consciousness about being Christians. Their Christian faith has been formed through those experiences.

When they narrate their faith journeys, members of the Chinese congregation state strong contrasts between pre-Christian experiences and post-Christian experiences or between belonging to Christianity and belonging to other traditional Asian religions or communistic atheism. The shifting moments take place in their belief systems, in their understanding of humans, and in the purpose of their lives. They are aware of and concerned about why they chose the Christian faith and what they believe as Christians. Also, they are aware of how they are different since they converted to Christianity.

One member, Tom, who grew up in mainland China under Mao's communism and experienced Cultural revolution compares Christianity with Chinese culture as God-centered beliefs and human-centered beliefs. He says, "Chinese culture and people have big faith in human beings and their hands, because they have achieved many things in their history." But he emphasizes, "Now, I believe in an extra, super human, my God." He adds, "Christianity is God centered and Asian culture is human-centered. As Christians, the central point is that salvation is only by God." He claims that he became a Christian because he lost his faith in human beings.

In Post –Mao China there is an emerging issue; what theological insights can Chinese Christians suggest to other Christians with their long experiences within a

communist state. Ironically, Chinese Christians strongly reaffirm traditional theologies of Christianity and the ancient biblical doctrines. In a sermon preached at Riverside Church in New York in September 1979, K. H. Ting, the most articulate spokesperson for Three-Self churches in China said,

I might as well begin by saying there is nothing strikingly new to tell you about man as sinner and about man standing in need of Christ's salvation. During the last 30 years, I've seen ample evidence to confirm this conception of man. I've met and have been moved by many revolutionaries, men and women of high moral caliber, who have for 30 or 40 or 50 years forsaken everything in dedicating themselves to the cause of making China a more livable place for their people. . Yet, it is these admirable souls, who would readily agree with Saint Paul that the good they want to do they somehow fall short of, and the evil they don't want to do they somehow do in spite of themselves. If people who set such high moral standards for themselves feel that way, then to us Christians it is clear there is no ground to suppose that the message of Christ's redemption and of the sanctification of the Holy Spirit has turned irrelevant or pointless.⁴

I think this strong reaffirmation of traditional theology does not mean they do not have the need of new theologizing or new hermeneutics but they do need strong affirmation of orthodox doctrine first as Christians before they move on to the next step of their faith journeys, new hermeneutics. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement, however, aware of the issue of the basis of governmental authority. TSPM believes that the state is under the rule of God and that therefore believers should take part in the state. The communist may be an atheist, but this does not mean that God cannot work through unbelievers; ultimately God is the ruler of the nation and of the universe. Thus, "Chinese

⁴ Thomson Brown, 190.

Christians struggled with the issue of the Christian's ultimate loyalty, whether it should be to God or to the state."⁵

Another challenge is that of how Chinese Christians choose the common ground between Christianity and ideology of communism instead of magnifying their difference. It can be the next step of the Chinese Christian's faith journey who come out with strong consciousness of being Christians. Julia Ching suggests an alternative way "that of collaboration in the humanist cause, . . . a faith in man which can be acceptable to Christians, in so far as it is open to God."⁶

The second interpretation is that *faith is formed and nurtured in the dynamics between conflicts and peace in relationships. Faith is understood as seeking harmony.* Among these Chinese Christians faith is questioned when people feel conflicts in relationship with God, themselves and others. Also, faith is proved when people feel peace in relationship with God, themselves and others. Members of this Chinese congregation are sensitive about whether they have peace in their relationships or not. They have been seeking faith because they want to have peace in relationships. They have difficult times when they have troubles in relationships. They struggle with themselves and God to achieve peace in relationships. They have the conviction that God is with them when they have peace in relationships.

As their affirmation of being Christians they claim that they are changed now - happy, peaceful, joyful, and patient. They are happy because they can be nice and kind to

⁵ K. K. Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing?* 239.

others and have peaceful relationships with others and with themselves. In terms of purpose of life, they insist that they did not have a goal for their lives and they felt empty before they became Christians. But they claim that now they find purpose or a goal for their lives. They feel they have become totally different new beings because they have the purpose of life in God.

In Chinese religious culture making peace or harmony in relationships is the main goal of being humans. The Confucian *Tian* (Heaven) is not incarnated as a human being. In Confucius' understanding, human beings do not become *Tian* or Divine; the Confucian goal is the harmony between *Tian* and humanity. For Confucius, human beings actualize the creativity and goodness of *Tian* through their ethical lifestyle. Confucius sees that "to be human as *ren ren* (loving others) fulfills the mandate of heaven, so that all may live in righteousness and orderliness in relation to others as a society of sacredness. In other words, the mandate of heaven is given to human beings so that they can be moral selves as the free expression of their oneness with *Tian*."⁷

Chu, one of my interviewees struggled when her family was against her for being a Christian and marrying a Christian husband. Also, she had conflicts with her family's traditions, ancestor worship. She said she prayed a lot. And then, she found a way to resolve the conflict and achieved peace between obeying God and obeying her family tradition. She is clear in her own mind that she respects ancestors though she does not

⁶ Julia Ching, "Faith and Ideology in the Light of the New China," in *Theological Implications of the New China* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1974), 26.

⁷ Chung-Ying Chen, "Confucian onto-Hermeneutics: Morality and Ontology," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no.1 (Mar. 2000): 35.

bow to them. But one day when she had to bow to dead ancestors before their graves, because her family really wanted her to do. She did. At that moment, she asked God what she should have done. She said she heard a voice in her mind saying, “make peace in your family.”

She believes God is with her because God teaches her how to make peace in relationships. She bows to ancestors not because her family wants her to do, but because God wants her to make peace in relationships. She says, “When I obey God’s teaching, there is no conflict with God, myself and others.” For her, faith does not simply mean an absence of conflicts, but struggling with conflicts to achieve peace in God. I think her faith can be defined according to the Confucius ideal of harmony and peace in relationships. Her faith is formed and nurtured when she struggles with the dynamics of conflicts and peace in relationships.

The third interpretation is *that the pain in the relationship between Christianity and traditional religions and culture is acute, especially in the issue of ancestor worship, and it requires new interpretations about religious rituals. The issue is that of how to sing a new song to the Lord in a different land?* As I mentioned above, the Rites Controversy is still a major issue of Christianity in China and in Chinese churches. At an international conference on China held in Montreal, Canada, in October 1981, Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Fu Tieeshan of Beijing cited the issue posed by the Rites Controversy – foreign interference – as a problem, which still affects relations between Chinese Roman Catholics and the Roman papacy. This issue has brought conflicts

between the Chinese church and state, among Christian denominations in China, and among church and family members. K. K. Yeo says, "Indeed, many Chinese Christians find it difficult to be faithful Christians and filial pietists or Confucianists. Many live in the unresolved tension of embracing the teaching of Confucius and Christ without knowing how to unite the two."⁸

The Confucian belief was that the human being is compounded of two souls: an upper, or intellectual soul, called the *hun*, which becomes the spirit and ascends to the world above, and a lower, or animal soul, called the *p'o* which becomes the ghost and descends with the body into the grave.⁹ The ancestral worship was a memorial service, held in earlier times at ancestral temples, and after that at gravesides or at home. Wine and food libations were usually offered, with silent prostration in front of the tablets. Some Chinese Christians insist Confucian ancestral worship is honoring the ancestors and accept the rites as a cultural, not a religious matter. But a majority of Protestants see the ancestor rite as idolatrous while Catholics are more open.

Studying 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 which contain the issues of participating in the cultic meal (1 Cor. 10:1-22) and eating of idol food (1 Cor. 8:1-13 and 10:23-11:1) with cross cultural hermeneutic, Yeo suggests that "the spirit of Pauline rhetoric, which seeks to give a deliberative, forum type of discourse, is useful in responding to the issue of ancestor worship. A communal, deliberative dialogue will not attempt to give an easy answer of 'yes' or 'no', but rather it will create an ongoing process of interaction as all

⁸ K. K. Yeo, "Cruciform Love and Dao De: Paul's Ethic of Holiness and Chinese Morality of Ren Ren," 7.

parties commit themselves to that rhetorical event. We ought be more concerned with the process than with the answer.”¹⁰

Conclusion

This congregation is a very alive and dynamic faith community. Individual members’ interactions and shared experiences mark the boundaries of a variety of communities and those communities support individuals’ faith formation and nurture. Though individual members have their own inner longings seeking for purpose and goals in their lives, they seek the purpose of life with others in communities. There are vivid dynamics between individuals and communities. Because members of the congregation live in the dynamics between individuals and communities, relationships are very important for them. In their relationships with God, themselves and others (including ancestors) their faith is formed and nurtured. Individuals are seeking “purpose of life in God” with others in relationships. Each member’s experiences are shared in communities and those shared experiences shape each member’s faith formation and nurturing.

⁹ Küng and Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, 76.

¹⁰ K. K. Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 220.

CHAPTER 5

Show Me Your Faith

(Vietnamese Congregation)

Introduction

For Asian Christians the question that whether faith is believing or doing good works is one of main struggles because of long teaching of Confucianism asking high moral life. In this chapter I will study a Vietnamese congregation which has the main theme of faith and morality.

Before the Chinese occupation of Vietnam for a total of ten centuries from 111 B.C.E to 1427 C.E the Vietnamese people had their own indigenous religion - animism or the cult of spirits. In the cult of spirits there are spirits everywhere and at the head of the hierarchy of spirits, there is *Ong Troi* (Mr. Heaven) above all deities, immortals, spirits, and genies. Mr. Heaven is the personal, transcendent, the creator of the universe, source of all life and supreme judge. A Vietnamese theologian and educator, Peter Phan explains, "This religion is not organized; it has no sacred books, no official ministers, no public houses of worship (except the *te nam giao*) and no formalized rituals. Yet it is the most pervasive and transforming cult, because it is rooted in the family with ancestor worship as its most sacred practice."¹ *Ong Troi* is recognized as the principle and providence of humanity, as the immanent cause of all that occurs of life and death, of

¹ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 27.

happiness and misfortune, of wealth and poverty. The Vietnamese people believe in the existence of an almost infinite number of spirits.

The cult of the spirits is rooted in Vietnamese families with ancestor worship as its most sacred practice. Ancestor worship was practiced in Vietnam before Confucianism came from China. The spirits of ancestors are said to be present and to have needs much like those they had when they were alive. On the anniversaries of their death, sacrifices are offered to them. They are welcomed on New Year's Eve into the family's celebrations and bidden farewell on the third day with great respect and solemnity. "Indeed, there is not a single important event in the life of the Vietnamese family to which the ancestors are not invited as witnesses, from the celebrations of the New Year to the birth of a child, the death of a member of the family, the celebration of longevity (when a person reaches seventy), the earning of an academic degree, engagement, and wedding."²

During the Chinese occupation three religions came from China - Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism - and they became the official religions of Vietnam. Buddhism entered Vietnam toward the second century of the common era. It was Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes faith in Amida (Amitabha), meditation on an everyday activity, and the religious goal of being reborn in "Western Paradise." Buddhism had a peak between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries under the dynasties of Ly (1010 – 1225) and Tran (1225 – 1400). During this time there were many famous monks, many pagodas were built, Buddha statues were restored, monasteries

² Ibid., 26

were founded, and monks were exempted from tax and military service.³ The Ming domination of China (1407 – 28), however, confiscated Buddhist books, closed pagodas, and imposed Confucian doctrines and practices on the country.

Since the beginning of the third century Confucianism began to exercise a widespread influence on the Vietnamese people. Chinese rulers established Confucian schools and state examinations in Vietnam for the purpose of selecting government functionaries. Phan insists, “In contrast to Buddhist and Taoist religions which prescribe certain cultic acts, Confucianism, [except for the cult of Confucius of which we will speak shortly,] is more an ethico-political system than a religion, and it is in this respect that its influence on the Vietnamese culture is pervasive and enduring. Indeed, the central concepts of Confucian ethics lie at the basis of Vietnamese morality.”⁴

The first Christian missionaries to Vietnam were the Portuguese Dominicans in 1550. In 1583 a group of Spanish Franciscans came to Da Nong to preach; however, they did not stay long because they did not know the language. Christian mission in Vietnam by the end of sixteenth century was insignificant. It was only with the arrival of the Jesuits in Southern Vietnam in 1615 that Christianity began to take root. The persecutions of Christian missionaries in Japan during the seventeenth century directed the attention of Jesuit missionaries to other parts of the Far East such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

3 Ibid., 15

4 Ibid., 20-21.

During that time Vietnam was ruled independently by two clans of the same dynasty – Tonkin of the North and Cochinchina of the South. They competed for total and absolute power in the country causing missionaries to be tangled in the web of complex and intricate relations of two clans. Phan says, “The relationship among missionaries, merchants, and militaries was at best ambiguous. Though the missionary enterprise was guided exclusively by spiritual motives, early missionaries in Vietnam were not reluctant to lean on the economic and military power of the Portuguese crown to gain a foothold in the country.”⁵ “On the other hand,” he continues to argue, “to obtain trade and armament, the Vietnamese rulers shrewdly exploited the missionaries’ desire to remain in the country and to evangelize the Vietnamese.”⁶

Protestantism came to Vietnam only in the beginning of the twentieth century. Robert Jeffray who was a missionary of Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) came to Vietnam in 1911.⁷ The CMA Church was the only Protestant denomination, which actively worked with and was involved in the life of the Vietnamese people for fifty years. It’s influence is still great among Vietnamese Christians. CMA’s guiding rule was not to set up mission schools and orphanages and hospitals, but through teaching of the Bible to establish the Church, believing that a well-taught Church will develop its own conscience of the physical, social, economic, and educational needs of its people.⁸

5 Ibid., 13.

6 Ibid.

7 Homer E. Dowdy, *The Bamboo Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 11.

8 Ibid.

When the United States began replacing France, following the French defeat at Dien bien phu in 1954 many Protestant missions also began to rush into Vietnam. About twenty years later in 1973 twenty-six American Protestant mission organizations were in Vietnam representing, Evangelical, and Mainline denominations, Church World Service and World Relief Commission, Baptists and Quakers.⁹ Yet, almost overnight nearly all three hundred expatriates serving in Vietnam were gone on May 1, 1975 when America withdrew from the country. The relationship between religions from foreign countries and their politics, war, and economy intermingled (Catholic/France and Protestant/America) and it still casts shadows to the minds of Vietnamese people in terms of their understanding of Christianity and its faith. Because of these historical experiences, Vietnamese Christians ask themselves how they can be true Christians when they want to be true nationalist Vietnamese citizens.

I chose to study a Vietnamese congregation to find and understand crucial theological issues that Asian Christians face. The reasons I want to study a Vietnamese congregation are as follows:

- 1) Vietnam shares the common religious and cultural roots of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism with other East Asian countries such as, Korea, Japan, and China. It also has its own indigenous religions that have a commonality with other Asian indigenous religions, the reverence to spirits. On the base of these multifold religious

⁹ James E. Metzler, *From Saigon to Shalom* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1985), 25.

heritages and experiences the Vietnamese people received a new religion, Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant.

- 2) The unique experience Vietnamese Christians have is that Catholicism has had a long and strong influence on Vietnam due to the French occupation. The American involvement and Vietnam War add another unique situation to Vietnamese Protestant experiences. During American involvement in Vietnam from 1954 to 1975, Protestant churches and missionaries rushed into Vietnam, but when the American government pulled out from the country almost all churches and missionaries left also. I believe that all these religious, cultural, and political experiences of Vietnamese Christians represent a unique theological and educational view of the issues faced by Asian Christians.
- 3) Studies and research are done on the issues of the military, politics, and the economy of Vietnam; but studies on religion, especially, Christianity and theology are rare and hard to find. I believe and hope that more studies on Vietnamese churches might help in constructing Asian theology and theological education through identifying its unique and struggling issues.

The Vietnamese church that I studied is a Vietnamese United Methodist church located in Chicago, Illinois. I interviewed four lay members, two male and two females as well as the pastor of the church. Their ages ranged from the thirties to the fifties. Two interviewees were former Catholics and three of them were former CMA church members in Vietnam or America. I also observed the congregation's life, Sunday

worship, baptism, Friday Bible study, and fellowship activities including picnic and luncheon. I also gathered written documents produced and used in the congregation such as Sunday bulletins and newsletters. Interviewees spoke both English and Vietnamese and all interviews were conducted in English. English communication with one member who is in her fifties was challenging and an interpreter helped us. I asked the same questions that I used in the study of the Korean congregation and the Chinese congregation.

Description of the Congregation

The congregation is a Vietnamese United Methodist Church, which belongs to the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church. The church was started about 7 years ago (1996) by the current pastor who is in his late thirties. He was appointed to an Anglo-American church originally but he soon started a Vietnamese congregation in the same church facility. Initially, he worked half time for the Anglo congregation and half time for the Vietnamese congregation. The Vietnamese congregation grew well and the conference appointed him as the full time pastor of the Vietnamese congregation. The congregation moved four times to new locations because they didn't have their own facility but the Northern Illinois conference gave them the current church facility in 1999 when the members of the original congregation aged and died.

The pastor started this congregation with his family, and 6 members, the current membership is about 100 including youth and children. It has high worship attendance, averaging 75 on Sunday. It has diverse age groups from little children to older adults. Most old adults are the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants. Their main occupations are janitors of schools or hospitals, working with cleaning service or working for small businesses. Some of them lived in Europe since the Vietnam War prior to coming to the U.S.A. They speak Vietnamese and German or French. Most of the young adult members were either born here or came here at an early age. They are young professionals in medicine or high tech industries. Their main language is English but they speak and understand Vietnamese. The worship service and most church activities are conducted in Vietnamese and English interpreters are available during Sunday worship services.

The congregation was chartered to The United Methodist Church recently and they experienced some conflicts while establishing administration structures and guidelines under the disciplines of UMC. Some old leaders want to keep their ways of running the church (mostly their experiences in CMA churches in Vietnam) but young leaders know that they should follow UMC guidelines regarding making decisions through committees. They have the Church Council, the Board of Trustees, Pastor-Parish Relation Committee, the Finance Committee and the Education Committee. The chairperson of the Church Council, who is in his late thirties said:

Because we now are a charter church of UMC we have to follow UMC doctrines, policies and procedures. But there are divisions about following UMC policies. Old folks have their own ways of doing things and ideas. Young people are

different. Committees and boards are not efficient. People try not to offend each other in the meetings and jobs are not getting done. Getting things done is very slow.

The church has a sanctuary capacity of about 120 persons, four classrooms, one office, a kitchen and a big dinning room. Classrooms display children's crafts and pictures. In the sanctuary there is a piano, an organ and a set of band instruments that they use on Sundays. It is a typical sanctuary of The United Methodist church with small stained glass windows but it has a baptismal tub at a corner of the sanctuary. They have immersion baptism once a year at Lake Michigan but they also have baptisms in the baptismal tub at church on some occasions. Immersion baptism was the tradition of the CMA Church in Vietnam but most Vietnamese churches in America kept the tradition regardless of their denominations.

There is Sunday School for all ages at 10 o'clock in the morning and all members are asked to attend one of these classes. Worship service is held at 11 o'clock after Sunday School. Worship lasts one-and-half hours to two hours. Worship opens with a silent prayer and responsive reading followed by announcements, greeting and praise music. The praise band, which consists of a drum, bass, keyboard and a singer that leads the praise music. After the children's message children are dismissed to Sunday School.

The Sunday when I participated in their worship and fellowships they had a baptism and picnic at the Lake Michigan. People gathered at the lake around 10:30 in the morning. Before the baptism the pastor preached about, "What types of people God uses" in the context of baptism. After his sermon the whole congregation went down to

the shore. The pastor went into the lake first and the baptism candidate followed him. They went until the water was around their waists. The congregation sang the hymn, "Clean me with Water." The pastor recited the baptismal liturgy and prayed. He put the candidate into the water completely. When they came out from the water the pastor asked church leaders to join in laying hands on him and prayed in front of the congregation. The pastor told me that 12 people were baptized last year at this service.

After baptism there was a barbecue picnic at the lake. The pastor's wife prepared most of the food and the young people grilled them. People sat by families or age groups with the youth and children playing together. There was an even distribution among the various ages. I asked a member whether there is harmony or conflict among different age groups or generations. He said there is no harmony or conflicts because there is not a great deal of interaction between young and old folks. They have four fellowship groups by age and gender and most interactions take place within these fellowship groups.

There is an adult group, young adult group, women's group and youth group. Youth group has about 15 high school and college students. These fellowship groups meet Friday evenings at church for Bible study and prayers. The pastor leads the adult group and the pastor's wife leads women's group. Young adults share the leadership in their group and choose topics and texts that they want to study. Youth group consists of a discussion of current issues and fun activities such as, pizza night or movie night. When I visited them on a Friday evening the young adult group studied "forgiveness" and the youth group had movie night at church. They value these fellowship gatherings because

they follow up with each other in the group as well as study the Bible together. A young adult said, “I value my fellowship group so much. I gain new understandings of the Bible and Christian life through our discussion and sometimes I feel that the new truth dawn on me.” They have prayer services on Wednesday evenings at 7 o’clock. The band plays music for the service and the pastor shares a message. After the pastor’s message people share prayer requests and pray for each other, for the church, for the sick, for the evangelism of the community and for their home country, Vietnam.

Themes of the Stories of the Church

The most frequently voiced theme in the study of this congregation is “*growing and changing everyday through new understandings of the Bible and Christian faith.*”

The Bible is the word most frequently mentioned by the pastor and members in the interviews and in my observation of their services, programs, and activities. All members are asked to participate in one of the Sunday School classes. The pastor said, “I tell members that if they don’t want to attend Sunday School they don’t need to come to Sunday worship either. As you can not get a degree if you don’t study, you don’t learn Christianity if you don’t study the Bible.” The pastor challenges people to change their life style according to the Bible teaching.

Some members of this congregation are former CMA members or Roman Catholics. They distinguish their faith now as “having a better understanding of the Bible and Christianity.” When I asked two brothers who were from a Catholic family the

reasons why they joined this congregation, both of them answered that they took enough time to find out that this congregation studies the Bible seriously. The younger brother, John, who was baptized on the day I participated in their service said,

My brother brought me to this church. I joined in this church recently after I attended it more than four years. I found that people are serious with studying the Bible and trying to live out their learning. Though I was baptized in Catholic Church I decided to get baptized again because I now have new understandings of Christian faith and the Bible.

He added,

About six weeks ago we studied Jesus' great commissioning of his disciples in our Friday fellowship meeting. Up to that point I was worried that perhaps I don't contribute enough to church. I wondered I work for church as much as I can. I know I don't do as much as Oliver does who is the youth worker and my sister-in-law, Nancy, does. When we studied the great commissioning we talked about the difference between what Paul did and what John did as disciples. The point that my-sister-in-law made is that Paul went out and spread the gospel but John stayed and documented scripts. Without John we might not have the scripture that we have today. Man... It was the real moment that the clarity came to me. I understood that everyone has different roles to play. It hit me very, very clearly. I really understood that everyone has different roles in church. I don't have to be like Oliver or Nancy. As long as I do my role with a faithful heart, that's all God gives me.

I interviewed the youth worker, Oliver, and asked him what he has been trying to teach youth as an adult leader. He answered,

I try to teach them respect. I try to teach them to respect the elders and also to respect the way. Hopefully they learn to respect what the Bible says. The way means the way that they should live their lives according to the Bible. I try to teach them the truth, the path. I see many people who know the Bible but don't live it out. They don't walk the path. The word makes the path of life.

When I asked him again what is his favorite Bible passages or doctrine that he teaches most often, he responded,

I want them to take the Bible as a whole. I hope they understand the Bible as a whole experience about how to live and they can make a way of life from it. Some people think if they keep the Ten Commandments or believing certain doctrines they are Christians. But I think it is too rigid. Nowadays we live in a very complicated world. Rather than rules I want to teach guidelines about how to live, how to react, and how to behave as Christians. I don't like faith formulas.

The second theme that I found in this congregation is that "*the Holy Spirit guides my journey of faith.*" The people of this congregation acknowledge and appreciate the presence of the Holy Spirit with them. The Holy Spirit is the second most often mentioned word in the interviews. Kim, one of interviewees, believes that the Holy Spirit healed her when she was young. She said,

When I was little I was very sick. Doctors gave me up. My parents lived in a rural area in Vietnam and they were poor. They couldn't do anything more for me. My relatives thought I was dead. They told my mom to prepare a burial. But my mom said "no" to them. She knelt down and prayed beside my bed. She cried and prayed many days. One day all of a sudden I became alive and kicked her chest. I heard a voice saying, 'child, get up.' It was the Holy Spirit who heard my mom's prayer and healed me.

They are sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit during the worship and praise music. A member, David, who plays guitar in their praise band said that the praise music that the band plays help people to be touched by the Holy Spirit and open themselves to him. For them, praise music is not a performance but a tool helping people to connect with the Holy Spirit. He said,

In 10 years of my faith journey there was the biggest leap about three years ago. One evening at a church retreat I practiced music for the next day's worship by

myself. When I played guitar I suddenly felt the Holy Spirit. My heart was strangely warm and I knew the Holy Spirit was with me. I hope that our praise music helps people feel the presence of the Holy Spirit and realize the love and guidance it gives us.

The Sunday bulletin of the church has one Bible passage every week as their faith statement. It says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours." (Mark 11:24) They believe that prayers are answered because the Holy Spirit prays for them. The pastor told me how the Holy Spirit called him to ministry. He said,

It was January 8th of 1984. At that time my dad had a cancer. I have seven siblings but all of us were away from home. That day I received a phone call from my mom. She said that dad is in a critical situation. It was 5:15 in the morning. After I hang up the phone I knelt down and prayed. I asked God to remove his pain. I told God that if he died let him die without pain. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in my heart with peace. About 15 minutes later mom called me again and said dad is totally O.K. and I did not need to come home. I believed that the Holy Spirit prayed with me and God answered my prayer. That moment I also heard God's call to ministry. I was a computer professional but I left the job and went to Europe as a missionary for three months.

Most members attend the Wednesday evening prayer services and share the belief that the Holy Spirit prays for them and with them and God answers their prayers.

The third theme is that "*Christians should have higher standards of life.*" When I asked about significant people who influence their faith, three lay members, all of them, Kim, David, and John pointed out someone who showed good examples of Christian life to them by sacrificing themselves. Missionaries' names or mission works were often mentioned as significant people or events because they sacrifice their jobs and families

for God's work. Kim mentioned one of her home church members as her role model. She said,

Her name is Chau. She is ten years older than me. She led me and trained me to become a Sunday School teacher and church secretary. She sacrificed her time and volunteered many things for church. She is my model of faith. She was an electronic engineer but she gave up her job to go to seminary. She now is a missionary in Singapore. I want to be a missionary like her sometime. She gave up so many things for the Lord. She even does not marry to serve the Lord. I look up to her as my role model.

Sacrifice or giving up is a big quality as a trait of Christian life among people in this congregation. John pointed out two members of church as people who are the most influential to him and to others. The reason he looks up to them is that they contribute so much to church and sacrifice their time and resources. He also mentioned that his fiancée was on a summer mission work this summer for three months and he felt fortunate to have a devoted woman as his future wife.

They believe that Christians are saved by faith but they want to see and show each other the good works, sacrifices, and ethical and moral ways of life as Christians. The pastor said that he was very bothered by watching some seminarians who smoked at school and church. He said, "They are future pastors but their life style is not different from secular people. Jesus calls us as light of the world. We should not be a stumbling block for others. Rather, we should have higher standards of life as Christians."

"Higher Standards" mean anything from specific ethical and moral behaviors to the Christian life style as a whole. David mentioned his wife as the most significant person in his faith journey because she shows her faith in daily life. He called her "the

embodiment of Christian faith.” When he decided to convert to Christianity and joined church the main reason was that he saw the model of faith in his wife.

Pastors are expected to live out or show their faith to parishioners as leaders. The good skill of relationship, administration, preaching or any pastoral skills are less important than “showing good models of faith.” The pastor explains that:

I struggle between my growing up experiences in the CMA Church and new experiences in United Methodist Church (UMC). In CMA Church you never smoke or gamble as a Christian. They are very conservative. But UMC Christians don’t care of those things. They are very liberal. In Asian culture Christians hold very high standards. Early missionaries taught us very conservative Christian guidelines. CMA Christians can be hypocritical when they ask high standards of others but they don’t practice the same standards. UMC Christians can be stumbling blocks to others because of their immoral and unethical life style.

The fourth theme is “*church is my home and members are my family.*” Cookie, one of interviewees, is in her fifties. She was born of a Chinese father and Vietnamese mother who were Buddhists in Southern Vietnam. During the Vietnamese war she lost her mother and moved to Germany. She met her husband there and became German Lutheran following her husband’s religion. Then, church became her second home in a strange land supporting her marriage, child rearing, and exchanging news about her homeland. After 18 years’ living in Germany her family moved to the United States five years ago hoping for better jobs. Her family tried several Vietnamese congregations in the Chicago area and joined this church because they felt the most at home there. She invited her father from Vietnam and he joined this church too.

She said, "Though I found this church in a telephone book, it is my home now. As Christians we are suppose to be brothers and sisters and I really feel that we are family. All my family members, even my father who was lifetime Buddhist, are members of this church family. I am very thankful to God to have this church family."

In this church children and youth are taught to respect their elders and to treat them as their own family members. Children are cared for and disciplined by any adult members in church. The pastor who is in his thirties is expected to be a model of how to treat elders. The pastor's wife is expected to act like the mother of a big family. Elders are supposed to be included in every important decision made in the church. It is hard for young people to challenge elders in church meetings. Young members who grew up in the American culture know how things can be done differently in church but they also know that they should be patient with elders who have different ways of doing things.

Some elders are concerned that their children might forget them after they die. One member who transferred from Catholic Church following his son said, "I know that my children will not do ancestor worship or pray for my soul after I die. I know that is the Protestant Christian way but I am concerned that they will forget about me and all the ancestors."

Though they do not practice ancestor worship, members invite the pastor and other members when they have anniversaries of family members' deaths to have worship and fellowship. They give thanks to God for their ancestors and share stories about them

in the worship and prayers. They do this memorial service for dead parents and grand parents every year on their anniversary of their deaths.

Interpretations of the Themes

The first interpretation is that *young Vietnamese-American Christians are seeking fresh understanding of the Bible and Christian faith on the basis of their cultural and religious heritages. For them understanding biblical teachings is not only understanding doctrine or faith formulas but respecting the way of life that the Bible teaches as a whole and live Christian life on the way.* In contrast with the new phenomena of young American Christians' seeking Bible churches that teach rationalized biblical and faith formulas, young Vietnamese-American Christians are seeking a more wholistic understanding of the Bible.

They came to America at young ages and have been educated in America in areas of computer, engineering, or medicine. They are much more reasonable and rational than their parents' generation and seek clear understandings of what the Bible teaches about Christian life and faith, why they believe them, and how to live out those beliefs. David who was a former Catholic explained why he transferred to this church, "The teaching that I learn in this church is more agreeable for me than my Catholic experience. I want to think and practice biblical teachings." Though they seek rational understandings of the Bible, they do not seek any consumable knowledge about the Bible. They long to respect biblical truth as the way of Christian life. I was shocked to hear

“respecting the way” in terms of seeking faith from a young Vietnamese Christian’s mouth because it is one of major themes that Asian theologians and scholars insist is an Asian way of theologizing or understanding of the truth.

Julia Ching says, “The Chinese word Tao is an equivalent of both the Greek word *Logos*, the Word, and the Greek word *Hodos*, the Way. It has been used in translations of St. John’s prologue – ‘In the beginning was the Tao’ – and contains therefore echoes of the line ‘I am the Way, the truth and the life.’”¹⁰ In Taoism the Way (Tao) is the concept of constantly changing with wholistic understanding of truth or word. *Lao-Tzu* begins with the famous line, “The Way (Tao) that can be spoken of, is not the constant Way (Tao).” In Taoism the express purpose of humans is to understand the will of Heaven and to follow it.

From a Western theologian’s perspective Hans Küng compares the Asian concept of “Tao” to Martine Heidegger’s concept of “Being.” He sees that Tao is the way that gives all ways, the very source of our power to think reason, mind, meaning, and *logos* properly mean. He asks, “If, however, all that is the Way, then is the Tao not identical with *Being*?”¹¹ According to him, Heidegger’s concept “Being” could be understood as “Being in becoming.” He says, “[Or, as] we could now say, *being as the Way, the Way as being*.”¹² Interestingly enough, I think, Western philosophers contemplate “being,” while Asians respect “the way.”

10 Küng and Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, 132.

11 Ibid., 172.

12 Ibid., 173.

The difference between contemplation and respect lies in the issue of power. When we contemplate something, we, as the subject, have power to contemplate the objects. But when we respect something or someone the objects have power to be respected. Ching explains Asian concept of power: “I refer here to the “power” (*te*) – by which the universal Tao becomes particular. It is the power of the natural, of simplicity, even of weakness. Yet it teaches the lesson of survival, of how to keep one’s own integrity in a time of disorder. This is possibly the most important practical lesson of Taoist philosophy, and it has had immense importance in the development of Taoist religions.”¹³ Asian Christians, who have Tao “DNA” seek to find the way of living according to the Way in their faith journey. In Israel wisdom tradition the “fear of the Lord” is called the “beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7), and wisdom is regarded as the gift of God. When we consider that biblical meaning of “the fear of God” is giving honor or reverence to God, “respect” which has an aspect of humbling oneself before majesty, might, or power can be understood the same meaning of entering the knowledge of God or divine wisdom.

The second interpretation is that *there is no separation between religion and ethic or faith and work in Vietnamese Christians’ understanding of faith. They believe ‘salvation by faith only’ but they highly value showing their faith in an ethical life style and ask others to show their faith in actions.* We can interpret that their expectation of high standards of Christian life is from Charismatic CMA missionaries’ teaching of Christians’ holy living. CMA missionaries were the first Protestants to bring the gospel

13 Ibid., 133

to small villages, rural areas, and even to jungles in Vietnam. They were the only Protestant group of missionaries for about fifty years in Vietnam and their influence was great.

CMA's four-fold Gospel teaches that Jesus is the Savior, the Healer, the Sanctifier, and the second coming King. According to them faith is not the factor for experience but is the work of the Holy Spirit. They teach Christians "to make holy," "to baptize with the Spirit," "to cleanse," and "to live pure." I think the reason that the CMA missionaries' teaching of 'holy living' has been well accepted by Vietnamese ordinary people is that it incorporates the fused relationship between theology and ethics or faith and work in Asian religious cosmology and teaching.

In Western understanding of theology or Christianity, it is quite acceptable to differentiate and to contrast theology and ethics, faith and works, doctrine and practice. Confucianism, however, emphasizes practicality and usefulness of one's learning from the wisdom. K. K. Yeo says, "The intertwined relationship between cosmology and anthropology, theology and ethics, universe and family, is the essence of Chinese culture and religion, which is commonly termed as *Dao De* ("The Way and the Morality"). The word *Dao* may be rendered as *Logos* in Greek. *Dao* or *logos* speaks of the creative principles and wisdom that generate the way of life, which in turn is a harmonious plenitude. While *Dao* in Chinese means the relationship with the cosmos, *de* signifies the relationship with humanity."¹⁴

14 K. K. Yeo, "Cruciform Love and Dao De" 14.

According to Yeo in the Chinese understanding of Dao the cosmos has its natural process of creation and redemption. As such, humans can be morally responsible parts of that process. In Contrast, “faith” in the Pauline epistles is not a rigid subscription to certain religious ideology or dogma or good deeds. Faith is trust animated by hope and love, *being faithful just as the incarnated ‘Christ was faithful*. But Vietnamese Christians cannot be satisfied with just *being faithful*. In their Confucian experience and tradition the expression of the transcendence should be in a concrete manner, such as the moral order in the ethical realm. The dialectical relationship between *Dao* and *de* in classical Confucianism is the union between theology and ethics, which depends on the union between *Tian* (Heaven) and humanity. This theme, “show me your faith,” is more dominant among the first generation of Vietnamese than among the second generations in my interviews.

The last interpretation is that *as exiles of political turmoil and war Vietnamese Christians seek the true home in their faith community*. The congregation that I interviewed had many generations from older adults to children. Though each generation has different needs and cultural experiences and even speak different languages they seek true shelter and home in their church. It is typical that there are cultural conflicts between first generation and the next generation in any immigrant community and church. For example, Korean immigrant churches provide Korean schools hoping that their children will keep their native language and culture but their children tend to resist melting into their parents’ cultural world. The conflict in culture and language between the first

generation and the second generation or even with the 1.5 generation is the biggest issue that Korean immigrant churches face. Most of them have two congregations in one church, one for the Korean speaking generation and the other for English speaking generation.

The second generation or young people in this Vietnamese immigrant church also speak English as their main language but they appreciate their parent's generation's sacrifice, living in a strange world, and seek a way making a home together in their faith community rather than separating themselves in a different congregation. Young people know how their parents left the homeland in tragedy and sacrifice themselves to make a living in America. They are proud of their parents' generation's endeavor and respect them. One young member said, "Speaking and understanding Vietnamese is challenging to me. But I am so proud to be a member of a Vietnamese congregation. This church keeps reminding me of my identity as a Vietnamese Christian and we, members, are on the journey of faith together."

CHAPTER 6

Theology of Salvation and Theology of Community

n Asian Contexts

Introduction

Two main theological issues that emerged in the stories of three Asian congregations concerning their understanding of Christian faith are: the need of a new salvation paradigm and the development of the theology of community in Asian contexts. In the study of Asian congregations I observed that Asian Christians convert to Christianity seeking a more satisfying religious salvation paradigm. Simply stated, to have eternal life in heaven by believing in Jesus as the Savior. However, facing the issue of salvation of their non-Christian family members they struggle with more questions without appropriate theological conversations or teachings in the church. Not only Asian Christians, I believe, but also all who live in pluralistic religious environments face the same theological question of salvation. However, the unique issue that the Asian Christians struggle with is that they raise the questions of salvation from the Asian contexts of family and communities where their identity and loyalty belong.

The communities in which Asians live and participate in are symbolic molds or frames where their faith formation and faith-nurturing take place. In his theological autobiography David Ng claims, “Every Chinese person’s life image or life theme is community.”¹ From the stories of Asian congregations and the people whom I

¹ David Ng, “A Path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community,” in *Journeys at the Margin*, ed. Phan and Lee, 85.

interviewed, I believe that living in communities and understanding the importance of community is a main theme of in the life and faith of Asian people. Ng describes the community that Asians experience as concentric circles beginning with families and extending to the global community. This daily life theme now seeks theological explanations and educational implications for Asian Christians.

In this chapter I will exam the theology of community and theology of salvation in Asian contexts. I believe that there is an intersection or an overlapping area between the theology of community and theology of salvation in Asian contexts. They are interrelated. Theology of community expresses or defines the scope of theology of salvation and its paradigm. One frequent question that Asian Christians ask is “What will happen to my non-Christian family members when they die?” or “How do I include ancestors as family in Christian theology?” This question implies two theological issues: how to understand Christian salvation in the context of Asian religions and culture and how to understand traditional Asian family values in the context of Christian theology of the faith community. Though these two issues are intermingled I will first exam each issue separately and then examine the intersection.

Theology of Salvation in Asian Contexts

The second Vatican document with regard to *Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian religions* (1965) and the recent significant document of the W.C.C., the *Baar Statement* (1990) address the issue of how to come to a fresh understanding of Christian salvation in non-Christian religious cultures and societies.

These documents see the workings of the Holy Spirit in other religions. The Baar Statement states,

We affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths. Further we affirm that it is within the realm of the Spirit that we may be able to interpret the truth and goodness of other religions and distinguish the "things that differ", so that our "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1.9-10).

We also affirm that the Holy Spirit, the Interpreter of Christ and of our own Scriptures (Jn. 14.26) will lead us to understand afresh the deposit of the faith already given to us, and into fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insight, as we learn more from our neighbors of other faiths.²

These documents also see that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ with regard to human salvation refers to the saving power manifested in Jesus Christ. These are remarkable efforts of inter-religious dialogues among theologians and religious persons seeking a fresh understanding of salvation.

In the middle of those inter-religious dialogues there are some unresolved problems about theology of salvation. Kyung Jae Kim summarizes those problems:

There are conflicts and seemingly opposing points of view between East Asian ontocratic religions and Christian theocratic religion, between nature religions oriented to the here and now and historical religion oriented to a futuristic omega point, between non-personal religions and personal religions, between self-awakening into salvation and faithful dependence on grace for salvation, and between Buddhistic *nirvana* interpenetrated with *samsara* and the Christian eschatological kingdom of God with its focus on the future.³

In Asian religions all in the universe is seen to mediate the sacred power of the ultimate. High mountains, piles of stones, and large trees are looked upon as sacred. God, the cosmos, and humankind are all identified as one within concentric circles. Asian

² World Church Council, "Baar Statement;" available from <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/baar.html>

³ Kyung-jae Kim, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions*, 164.

religions - Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism - all accept expressions like 'the universe is all one body' and 'the universe has one root.' Here, the universe refers not only to the natural world, but also to all the visible and invisible beings, both the divine and the transcendental. Kim explains, "Asian naturalism is different from western nature-mysticism, in that it is more simple and naïve. There is no past or future, only the present. There is always endless dynamic movement, yet it does not lose its middle way, the Mean."⁴

In the efforts of dialoguing with Buddhism, John Cobb insists that the Buddhist salvation, the absolute nothingness or *Sunyata*, cannot be merged with the Christian faith as the Ultimate Reality. Cobb suggests four questions with regard to the different understandings of salvation between Christianity and Zen Buddhism: "(1) Can a Christian surrender all attachment, craving, and clinging even to Christ? (2) Can a Christian accept as goal the dissolution of personal existence? (3) Can a Christian appropriate the vision of ultimate reality as Emptiness? (4) Can a Christian enter fully into the sheer immanence of the moment?"⁵

Cobb points out that many Christians' understanding of faith is that "if they participate in Christian practices, such as sacraments, prayer, and Bible reading with sincerity and faith they will be saved."⁶ He points out, however, Luther brought a deeper understanding of faith that "we are not saved by the correctness of our attitude but by an

⁴ Ibid., 167.

⁵ John Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 99.

⁶ Ibid., 101.

unconditional, utterly free, gift of God in Jesus Christ.”⁷ For Luther faith is almost identical with trust in an interpersonal relation.

Cobb explains that there are different views of self, of God, and of history between Buddhism and Christianity. In Buddhism there is no subject apart from objects and no objects apart from the subject. There is no place for a self that exists in itself over against the world. In Christianity the self is real and has responsible freedom. “The Christian goal is not the dissolution of the personal self but its continual transcending of the past through conformation to the ever new purposes of God.”⁸ For Christians God is Thou, the Other Power, in whom one trusts as the source, cause, depth or ground of being. Christian faith is to attain a right relation with God but “for most Buddhists the goal is not to attain the right relation to Buddha but to realize what the Buddha has realized, namely, ultimate reality.”⁹

In addition to Emptiness or absolute nothingness in Zen Buddhism, the *Li* in Confucianism and *Tao* in Taoism also deny the personal embodiment of the Ultimate Reality or any personal relationship between the Ultimate Reality and individual beings as two poles, while Christianity always thought of the creator as the eternal Thou who is in relationship with creatures. While recognizing this unsolved problem, Kim insists that there is mutual complementarity between Christianity and Asian religions. He says,

If *sunyata* in Buddhism, *Li* in Confucianism, *Tao* in Lao Tzu thought totally deny the personal element in the Ultimate Being, then it becomes a philosophical abstract reality, and cannot be the religious Ultimate reality, the ontological ground of power and meaning. On the other hand, if Christianity forgets the ‘God beyond god’ in the faith of the eternal Thou, the ontological ground of

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁹ Ibid., 111.

personhood, then the infinite God will be changed to a finite highest being, an idol manufactured in the image of humankind.¹⁰

Emphasizing the importance of the Baar Statement in understanding of different religious traditions Kim insists that the Baar Statement signified a change from Christocentric thinking to theocentric and pneumatic thinking. He says, “The theological position of the Baar Statement is similar to the theme of this present study in that it suggests the creative salvation event of God should be expanded to all human beings, for the Holy Spirit is also operating in the spirituality of other religions.”¹¹ In regret of the exclusivist prejudice of Korean Christians against non-Christian religions,¹² Kim suggests that there is a need to teach the religious history of East Asia in theological education and lay education in East Asia in order to share in the religious experience of other religions.¹³

In his book, *Third-Eye Theology*, C. S. Song sees that God’s salvific event is in creation even before the event of Exodus or Christ on the cross. He says, “Creation and redemption are in reality two sides of the same coin. Where there is creation, there is redemption. ... Creation is God’s redeeming act, while redemption is God’s creating act.”¹⁴ He criticizes the western scientific, conceptual, and rational approach of the knowledge of God that God is understood as a rational Being who, like subject-matter under scientific investigation, discloses his nature to human beings. Song introduces the

¹⁰ Kim, 170.

¹¹ Kim, 183.

¹² In 1992 the Korean Methodist Church excommunicated two professors of the Methodist Seminary because they claimed there can be salvation through other religions.

¹³ Kim, 181.

¹⁴ C. S. Song, *Third-eye Theolog*, 40.

meditative and intuitive approach of Zen Buddhism to Reality as an Asian way of theology.

Intuition does not explain phenomena with logic or formula but simply opens a door for us into the dimension of things hidden from us thus far. Song compares intuition to art and claims theology should be or could be art rather than science. He says, “Theology or religion partakes of artistic profundity at its most sincere level where theology and art cross each other’s path. In that intersection artistic theology is born and theological art comes into being. Both artistic theology and theological art are children of intuition.”¹⁵

A Korean theologian, Rue Tong Shik, also develops Asian hermeneutics of religion in the intersection of theology and art. He says, “Art is esthetical expression of spirituality and religion is cultural expression of spirituality which both are beyond logic and ration. Art and religion are two true privileges only given to human.”¹⁶ He finds the uniqueness of Korean spirituality in *Pungruedo*, which has esthetical aspects and religious aspects together in their religious spirituality.¹⁷

This Asian way of theology and hermeneutics, the intuition, brings a fresh understanding of salvation to Asian Christians through story telling, myths, or autobiographies. In his book, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, C. S. Song defines his hermeneutics as people hermeneutics and finds the meaning of salvation in Jesus’ message of God’s reign in Luke 4:18-19.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

¹⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶ Tong Shik Rue, *Pungruedo woa Hangugui Jongkyo Sasang* (Pungruedo and Korean Religious Thoughts) (Seoul: Yeonsei University Press, 1997), 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.¹⁸

He claims that salvation is not creed or dogma about Jesus but Jesus himself for suffering Asians. He says, "The real Jesus is the light of God's salvation that men, women, and children kindle in the darkness of hell. The real Jesus is that power of God's truth that people manifest in the face of the power of lies wielded by the powers and principalities of this world. Jesus is the story of such people. And being the story of such people, Jesus is the story of God"¹⁹ The art of story telling of Jesus is one of many powerful ways that Asian Christians understand and communicate the paradigm of salvation of Christ Jesus.

Theology of Community in Asian Contexts

In Western culture, especially in American culture, voluntarism is the main cause of communities²⁰ and the will of participants of the community is viewed as the primary principle of human association. Communities formed through the mutual consent of individuals who gather together toward some common goal, join forces to accomplish some task, advocate some shared cause, or participate together in some activity. If

¹⁸ Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1991 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

¹⁹ C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 14

²⁰ Charles Foster criticizes Westerhoff that communities in America are mainly based on voluntarism. See Charles Foster, "The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education," in *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* by Jack Seymour and Donald Miller, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 67-70.

Western understanding of community or society is based on human will and mutual consent, Asian understanding of community or society is based on mutual trust.

A Confucian scholar, Tu Wei-Ming, sees a society in Confucian culture as a fiduciary community based on mutual trust, which is practiced first by filial piety and ancestor worship in a family. He says, "For traditional Confucian, ancestral worship by filial sons may be taken as the microcosm of an ideal society. Ceremonial acts in this connection symbolize desirable behavioral patterns."²¹ In this Confucian understanding of community a person who is incapable of caring for his close relatives can hardly be expected to understand universal love in a real experiential sense. If the person's attention is only focused on his family and relatives, he is no more than a narrow-minded nepotic person. He needs to learn a sense of righteousness, *li*. Tu Wei-Ming explains, "*li* (righteousness) mediates between the universal principle of humanity and the particular situations in which the principle is concretely manifested."²² In Confucian thoughts *li* symbolizes a whole way of thinking about how people relate to each other and practice respect, reciprocity, and community.

In his theological autobiography, "A path of concentric circles; toward an autobiographical theology of community," David Ng claims, "The Confucian sense of community is similar to the New Testament sense of *koinonia*. When Asian North Americans come into the Christian Church they bring with them their sense of community. This sense of community is their contribution to the Church and calls the Church away from an individualistic faith back to a corporate faith."²³ According to him

²¹ Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 48.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

²³ David Ng, "Path of concentric circles," 101.

'*koinonia*' is translated "*tran qi*" in a recent Chinese translation of the New Testament which means solidarity and responsibility. Chinese understandings of solidarity and responsibility are based on the Confucian understanding of family and community, which are bonded by *li* not by individual choice.

There are different understandings of the relationship between self and community in the west and the east. C. S. Song tells a story about this confusion between a Buddhist priest and a Christian theologian, Tillich.

The Buddhist priest asks the Christian philosopher, "Do you believe that every person has a substance of his own which gives him true individuality? The Christian answers, "certainly!" The Buddhist priest asks, "Do you believe that community between individuals is possible?" The Christian answers affirmatively. Then the Buddhist says, "Your two answers are incompatible; if every person has a substance, no community is possible." To which the Christian replies, "Only if each person has a substance of his own is community possible, for community presupposes separation. You Buddhist friends, have identity, but not community."²⁴

Song explains, for the westerner a community is based on the principle of the separation of individual identity but in Asia, community is built on the principle of unity and harmony.²⁵ Westerners approach the subject of community from individual identity, while Buddhists are to subsume individual identity under community.

Buddhist meaning of community is *Samgha* in Sanskrit. Literally it means "comprising," or "multitude." In Sanskrit, *Samgha* is defined as "Close contact or combination, and collection or assemblage ... multitude."²⁶ According to the Pali-English dictionary, *samagga* (from *samgha*) means being in unity, harmonious.²⁷ In Chinese it is

²⁴ See Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia university Press, 1963) 75.

²⁵ C. S. Song, *Third-eye Theology*, 5-6.

²⁶ Chai-Shin Yu, *Early Buddhism and Christianity* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

translated as “multitude and unity” or “solidarity and unity.” This Chinese character *(*Joong*) for Samgha incorporates both meaning of “individual” and “community.” It can refer to one individual monk or groups of people.

The Buddhist teachings (*dharma*) emphasize ‘the middle path’ as the principle of the unity of the Buddhist community. “The Middle Path” implies avoidance of the two extremes. Buddha called his teaching “doctrine by the middle as all things are causally continuous (or collective) uprising.”²⁸ The doctrine of middle path leads to the positive practice of the noble Eight Fold path, which leads to *nirvana*. In the doctrine of middle path, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are paradoxically transcended. Here is a story of Buddha’s teaching about unity in community.

The Kosambi monks were divided into two disputing groups. Buddha did not say which group was right or which was wrong. Rather, he suggested that, for the sake of unity within the community, it would be justifiable to say that one faction was right even though it appears to be wrong, or that one was wrong even though it appeared to be right.”²⁹

In both Buddhism and Confucianism community gives name to individuals, that is, identity to the individual. There is unity and harmony not only between individuals and community but also between human beings and Heaven. In Confucian thoughts, human beings can form a complete union with Heaven because human beings, by nature, share the reality of Heaven. This union with Heaven and/or cosmic community is possible through each human’s moral self-cultivation. Tu Wei-Ming explains, “*Ch’eng*, so conceived, is a human reality, or a principle of subjectivity, by which a person becomes ‘true’ and ‘sincere’ to himself; in so doing, he can also form a unity with

²⁸ Ibid., 67.

²⁹ Ibid., 68.

Heaven.”³⁰ “The relationship between Heaven and man,” he says “is not an antinomic bi-unity but an indivisibly single oneness.”³¹ Tu explains that through the ontological inseparability of Heaven and men the sage to act as the co-creator of the cosmos.³²

In Buddhist thoughts there is no individual self apart from communities and there is no community apart from individual selves because there is no subject apart from objects and there are no objects apart from a subject. John Cobb explains, “[This means that] the idea about objects and subjects with which we ordinarily reflect are confused: But what we actually have—or, better, *are*—are objects becoming subjects which become objects constituting new subjects.”³³ “We identify ourselves with what we have done and been in the past,” he says as a Westerner, “and thereby encumber ourselves with guilt.”³⁴

Buddhists perceive this western concept of identity as illusory because they think of human events forever and there is no past and no future. For them human lives to the course of human events in this planet is an illusion. There is only non-particular and unchanging unity and harmony of universe. Cobb says, “Because there is no beginning or end and no spatial boundary, every point anywhere in space and time is equally the center of the whole every other point is located in relation to it.”³⁵ In the same understanding, every one in a community or society is equally the center of the whole world and every other one is in the relationship with the individual.

³⁰ Wei-Ming Tu, 73.

³¹ Ibid., 84.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cobb, 86.

³⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁵ Ibid., 93

In the understanding of all Asian traditional religions, Rue Tong Shik, a Korean Christian theologian, insists that the whole universe consists of two universes: ‘time-space universe’ and ‘spiritual universe.’ These two universes are in dynamic relationship as *ying* and *yang* in the whole and they are connected by the “Way,” or *Logos*. According to him, Jesus, *Logos*, opens “the Way” for the creatures who live in ‘space-time universe’ to reach to the spiritual universe.³⁶ In his Asian Christian theology, not only humanity and Heaven but also the whole universe is in harmony and unity. Theology of community in Asian contexts helps us expand our scope of theology from individuals to community and to cosmos, which includes both the spiritual universe and the material universe.

Theology of community in Asian contexts may also open a door for a fresh understanding of the salvation paradigm - from salvation of individual human beings who profess their faith in Christ to salvation of community and to salvation of cosmos that is in the reign of God in unity and harmony - and changes the paradigm of salvation from a human centered paradigm to cosmos centered paradigm.

Salvation of Community, Salvation of Cosmos

In the Johannine gospel Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Here the body of Jesus implies the new temple and the phrase “raise up” relates to the body of Jesus who was risen. Through his resurrection he became head of the new community of believers, which replaced the temple. In Judeo-

³⁶ See Tong Shik Rue, *Pungruedo Woa Hangugui Jongkyo Sasang* (Punguredo and Korean Religious Thoughts) 22-24.

Christian tradition the temple and the church (new community of believers) are based on God's covenant of salvation. The Christian Church is established as continuity between Israel and the new people of God. Thus, Israel, as the chosen people of God, had religious unity based on their covenant with one God who saved them. They recorded this communal saving experience in Exodus, God said, "I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God (Exod. 6:6b-7a)

In the New Testament the members of the Church, as the new people of God, also have unity through the New Covenant with Christ who saves them. All of the metaphors relating to the Church are corporate in character, e.g., the Israel of God, the elect, the Body of Christ, the communion of Saints, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and the heavenly banquet. Paul's explanation of the Church as "The Body of Christ" shows that he understands the Church as a living organism. For this point he uses three metaphors: One Bread ("Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" – 1 Cor. 10:17), One Baptism ("For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" – 1 Cor. 12:13), and One Spirit ("There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling." – Eph. 4:4). Both in the old Covenant and new Covenant, being the people of God as the Church or as a nation, are oriented to community rather than to individualistic life. Paul goes further in his understanding of salvation that the whole creation is groaning in waiting for salvation. In

Romans he says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;” (Rom. 8:22).

This Judeo-Christian theology of community and salvation began to change to orient to individualistic salvation of human beings under western Hellenistic philosophical and cultural influence. Rosemary Ruether, a feminist theologian, criticizes western traditional understanding of the hierarchy of humans over nature in relation to the hierarchy of males over females. She insists that it was Hebrew thought that “when the people repent and return to obedient to God, God will restore creation and bring it to ideal perfection in which justice and harmony reign.”³⁷ She says, “God’s covenantal relation with humanity links the human and natural communities in one creation. Nature suffers along with humanity in the ups and downs of relationship with God.”³⁸

She claims, however, Greek thought and philosophy developed radical dualisms and alienation between human consciousness and nature. She says, “Unlike Hebrew thought, Greek philosophy raises human (male) consciousness to the same transcendent status as God, outside of and above nature.”³⁹ The Hebrew thought basically regards human mortality as natural and good. But “when the Greek idea of immortality of the soul begins to make its impact on Jewish thought, there is at first an effort to accommodate it within a extended and immortalized concept of the messianic age.”⁴⁰ She explains that under the influence of Greek philosophical thought theology developed

³⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

dualism that “the ideal world above is the realm of eternal life” and “Being is perfect and fulfilled, without change or corruptibility.”⁴¹

In this dualistic thought nature lies under a curse rather than grace. Since the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century nature became the object of knowledge. On the basis of her critique of the traditional model of hierarchy, God-spirits-male-female-non-human nature-matter, she suggests an ecological-feminist theology. Ecological-feminist theology denies the dichotomy between nature and history and asks “the ‘brotherhood of man’ needs to be widened to embrace not only women but also the whole community of life.”⁴² Ecological-feminist theology sees the nature as “fallen” not because “it is evil itself” but because “it has been marred and distorted by human misdevelopment.”⁴³

As an ecological-feminist, Ruether asks the socioeconomic redemption of sexism and she insists on the dynamic unity of creation and redemption. She says, “We cannot split a spiritual, antisocial redemption from the human self as a social being, embedded in sociopolitical and ecological system.”⁴⁴ Embracing Native Americans’ religious understanding of life and death, which sees the whole cosmos as a community of life, Ruether suggests a new paradigm of salvation that is salvation of both human and nature as a community. She also criticizes both ‘historical eschatology’ and ‘personal eschatology.’ Her conclusion of ecological-feminist eschatology is:

In effect, our existence ceases as individuated ego/organism and dissolves back into the cosmic matrix of matter/energy, from which new centers of the individuation arise. It is this matrix, rather than our individuated centers of being,

⁴¹ Ibid., 240.

⁴² Ibid., 87.

⁴³ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 215.

that is “everlasting,” that subsists underneath the coming to be and passing away of individuated beings and even planetary worlds....In this sense, the problem of personal immortality is created by an effort to absolutize personal or individual ego as itself everlasting, over against the total community being. To the extent to which we have transcended egoism for relation to community, we can also accept death as the final relinquishment of individuated ego into the great matrix of being.⁴⁵

While Ruether still sees that God is outside of creation in her ecological-feminist theology another ecological-feminist theologian, Sallie McFague, suggests a metaphor that the world or universe is God’s body. This metaphor is not descriptive of God but it helps us think in an as-if fashion about the God-world relationship as a model. In the metaphor of God’s body, the body includes more than just Christians and more than just human beings. It includes the whole universe. She carefully discerns, however, that her metaphor is not pantheism because “it does not totally identify God with the world any more than we totally identify ourselves with our bodies.”⁴⁶ She insists that her metaphor is panentheistic; “That is, it is a view of the God-world relationship in which all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside God, though this does not mean that God is reduced to these things.”⁴⁷ Rather, “the world is our meeting place with God.”⁴⁸

In the traditional king-realm model, which is one of the major models of Western religion, sin is against God. In the body model, however, sin is against the world because the world is the body of God. McFague says, “Sin is the refusal to realize one’s radical interdependence with all that lives: it is the desire to set oneself apart from all others as

⁴⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁶ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 71.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁸ Sallie McFague, *Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), vii.

not needing them or being needed by them.”⁴⁹ She explains the concept of sin again, “Sin in the Christian tradition has usually been, first of all, against God; it is in our reflections also, for in the model of the universe (world) as God’s body, sin against any part of the body is against God.”⁵⁰ Interpreting salvation as “healing or preserving from destruction”, she insists that “salvation includes the preservation of nature.”⁵¹

In the contrast with the king-realm model she suggests an organic model, which has forms of unity and diversity from the common creation story. She says, “It is an organic unity inasmuch as we now know that everything that is is related to everything else internally from the beginning.”⁵² In her ecological unity everything is in togetherness and the earth is “home” rather than western sense of “hotel.”

As an Ecological theologian McFague values the seriousness of natural theology that “is concerned with showing the continuity between creation and redemption; that is to show that the God of redemption, the loving power who heals and saves the world and its creatures, is also the source of the entire cosmos and has been working in it from the beginning.”⁵³ She suggests ‘spirit’ as the way to speak of divine agency in continuing creation process. She says,

The deepest tradition of Christian thought is of God as spirit – not Holy Ghost, which suggests the unearthly and the disembodied, nor initially the Holy Spirit, which has been focused largely on human beings and especially the followers of Christ, but the spirit of God, the divine wind that ‘swept over the face of the waters’ prior to creation, the life-giving breath given to all creatures, and the dynamic movement that creates, recreates, and transcreates throughout the universe.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God*, 77.

⁵⁰ Sallie McFague, *Body of God*, 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

Though she values the understanding of salvation of natural theology, she points out that ecological-feminist theology should be concerned with issues of human and ecological oppression and injustice at a bodily rather than an existential level. She insists that our concern as theologians is “not primarily intellectual but aesthetic and ethical: wonder and awe at the immensity, richness, and diversity of creations as well as gratitude and care for all its forms of life.”⁵⁵ She calls her theology “theology of nature” and her theology of nature has many commonalities with Asian natural religions.

In his book *The Way of Jesus Christ* Jurgen Moltmann also sees Christology in the framework of nature. He credits Asiatic nature religions as a way of seeking the healing of nature and wounded souls.⁵⁶ He criticizes traditional doctrine of Creation and Christology as one-sided because it understands by creation only creation-in-the-beginning. He sees Christ’s three-fold office in the continuing creation process. He explains, “We shall interpret Christ’s mediation in creation in three separate strands or movements: 1. Christ as the ground of the creation of all things; 2. Christ as the moving power in the evolution of creation; 3. Christ as the redeemer of the whole creation process.”⁵⁷

He also sees the cosmos as a community consisting of human beings, animals, and plants. This community of creation is a community based on law. This law is “a law whose purpose is rehabilitation.”⁵⁸ For Moltmann eschatology or theology of salvation

⁵⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 275.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 338.

is not holding fast to personal faith until Christ comes back but reshaping the life in the community of Christ. He says, "It is life in anticipation of the coming One, life in expectant creativity."⁵⁹ His salvation paradigm is the rehabilitation of the community of Christ and it requires ethical commitment to reshape life in expectant creativity.

Both ecological-feminist theology and Moltmanns' Cosmic Christology have echoes in Asian theologians because both of them are concerned with spirit, community, nature, and cosmos. For instance, studying Korean traditional religions, Tong Shik Rue insists that Koreans have understood God through *Pung Rue Do* in their cultural contexts. *Pung Rue Do* is a Korean indigenous religion that is synchronized Buddhism and Taoism in Korean Shamanism. *Pung* literally means wind or spirit, *Rue* means movements, and *Do* means the way. *Pung Rue Do* is the way that God's creative spirit moves continually in the world. This *Pung Rue Do* was not abstract and intellectual religious teachings in Korea but embodiment or communication of God's spirit in human's daily life through just relationships, music and dance, and communion with nature. *Pung Rue Do* is spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical. Rue Tong Shik explains,

Do (Way) is one and many at the same time. Christ is the Way but the Way is expressed and experienced in many different ways in each different culture and nation. The way that Koreans have experienced is *Pung Rue Do*. An ideal human who follows *Pung Rue Do* practices just relationships with other humans, enjoys music and dance in a community, and visits mountains and waters for communion with nature. When these three – just relationships, art (music and dance), and communion with nature – are realized and united, the whole universe is in harmony and unity. That is *Pung Rue Do*.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 340.

⁶⁰ Rue Tong Shik, "Hanuel Naguneui Sarng kwoa Pyunghwa (Love and Peace of Korean Pilgrimages)," in *Hanguui Jongkyo woa Shinhak* (Korean Religions and Korean Theology), ed. Kye Joon Lee (Seoul: Center for Korean Theology, 1994), 21.

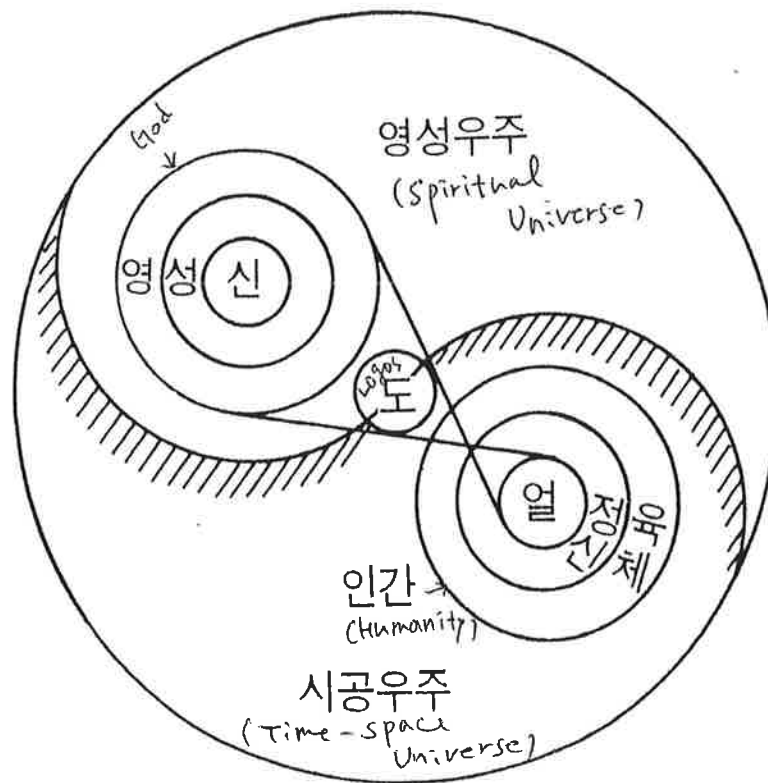
According to Rue, salvation is unity in God in both *Pung Rue Do* and Christianity. People experience the unity with God through liturgical dance, chant, and music in *Pung Rue Do*. Christians, however, unite with God because God initiates the unity or binding relationship through Christ. He says, “God who created the whole universe emptied himself and became a human. Thus, God and humans are united in Christ. Christ opens the Way (*Do*) that time-space universe can be united with spiritual universe (Heaven). Through his resurrection Christ brings the cosmos to God’s spiritual universe. Through the Cross and his resurrection the whole universe unites in God and that is salvation.”⁶¹

Conclusion

This cosmic salvation paradigm is different from individual salvation paradigm that has been based on a linear view of history as a single universal project leading to a final salvific end point. It is close to Rosemary Ruther’s understanding of total community of being and McFague’s salvation paradigm that the world is God’s body. It also is close to Moltmann’s salvation paradigm of rehabilitation of the cosmic community. Rue’s *Pung Rue Do* theology and its salvation paradigm, however, is more aesthetical and spiritual than feminist-eco-theological or Moltmann’s ethical paradigm of salvation because his comic salvation paradigm sees that God in Jesus Christ takes the initiatives of salvation and the cosmos unites with him in constant movement of God’s spirit.

⁶¹ Ibid., 27.

In his book, *Pung Rue Do and Religious Thoughts of Korea*, Rue shows his understanding of harmony and unity between “time-space universe” and “spiritual universe” in a diagram. Interestingly enough, his diagram of “time-space universe” shows that the concentric circles of communities are in dynamics and unity with the whole universe and his diagram of “spiritual universe” shows the dynamics and unity of the concentric circles of community of God. These two universes (“time-space universe” and “spiritual universe”) are connected by the *Way*.



Asians' traditional understanding of concentric circles of community from family to the whole cosmos opens a door to a new understanding of the salvation that salvation

is a cosmic community event rather than individual Christians' achievement of end time. It is a realization that salvation is God's continuing acts of creation and whole cosmos is in unity with God through his Spirit (the *Way*). Asian Christian's spirituality that has been influenced by many Asian traditional religions can understand this cosmic salvation with intuition rather than reasoning. For Asian Christians faith is experiencing the unity with God on the way and participating in the journey that God's Spirit leads out. Faith is an open journey with others in communities following Spirit's guidance.

CHAPTER 7

Journey Together:

Christian Religious Education in Communities

Introduction

How Asian Christians understand faith and how they shape or nurture their faith are two main questions that I have addressed in this study. The first question is a theological question and the second one is an educational question. I addressed the first question in chapter 6. I found that Asian Christians understand faith as the Way (*Do*), which is constantly moving and changing in dynamics and unity of whole life and whole universe. A Vietnamese youth worker said about faith and faith formation: “I try to teach youth to take the Bible as a whole. I hope they understand the Bible as a whole experience about how to live. And I hope that they can make a *way* of life from it.” Asian Christians are seeking a fresh understanding of the Bible and Christian faith on the basis of their cultural and religious heritages and experiences. For them understanding biblical teachings is not understanding doctrine or faith formulas but respecting the way of life that the Bible teaches as a whole and living a Christian life on the *way*.

Regarding the second question, Asian Christians nurture and shape their faith in communities. These communities are connected together in dynamics and unity as concentric circles from family to extended family, fellowship groups in church, church as a whole, home country, new country (America), the world which includes nature and to the whole universe which includes ancestors. Jack Seymour and Donald Miller explain in their book, *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* that faith is shaped by

tradition (religious instruction), community of faith, person (cognitive and emotional development), and mission (liberating action) in contemporary Christian education. They ask, "How is education an expression of Christian experience and revelation in the world? How does Christian education arise from the reality of the church in the world?"¹

I have been trying to answer these questions from Asian or Asian-American experience, culture, and reality. The main and dominant experiences, culture, and reality for Asians are issues of community. I will study how traditional religious education theories address community issues and how Asian Christians bring fresh understandings to religious Christian education on faith community issues in this chapter.

Family as a Faith Community

In traditional Asian religions -- Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism -- there was no concept of religious education or religious formation in a church or temple. Religious discipline, practice, and rituals happened mostly at home and in the village. Those traditional religions were not church based religions but family religions. Buddhist temples are monasteries where monks live and Confucian temples are for common rituals only on Confucian religious holidays. Religions were taught, practiced, and lived out in homes in daily life. Religious rituals and ancestor worship was held at home. There was no separation between religion and daily life or faith community and family.

When Christianity came to Asian countries, converting to Christianity was a family matter rather than a personal decision. Whole households were often converted and baptized together. Evangelical conservative missionaries who came to Asia during

¹ Jack Seymour and Donald Miller, "Open to God" in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* ed. Seymour and Miller, 10.

the 19th century, however, did not understand that religion in Asia was a family matter. There have been conflicts and competitions between traditional Asian family values and new Christian values in Asian Christian homes. They converted to Christianity but their homes have been run by traditional religious family values, mostly Confucian values. The western value of modernity has often been confused with Christianity. For Asian Christians claiming family and home as a Christian faith community and practicing Christian values and rituals at home are important issues.

In Christian education history in America, Horace Bushnell is well known for his concept, Christian nurture in families. He wrote the book, *Christian Nurture* in 1846 proposing a Christian family environment, infant baptism, and the “Organic unity of the family.” He raises a question, “What is the true idea of Christian education?” in *Christian Nurture* and answers his own question, saying, “That the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise.”² He rejected the conservative theology of the nineteenth century America, including emotionalism, revivalism, and the total depravity of man. He insists,

The aim, effort, and expectation should be, not as is commonly assumed, that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time when he went through a technical experience, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.³

He insists that faith is shaped in homes by organic unity of the family rather than in revival meetings or in Church School. In the organic unity of the family, members have organic relation with each other. In the organic unity of family, he says, “The bond

² Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1888), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

is so intimate that they do everything together unconsciously and undesignedly. Their character, feelings, spirit, and principles must propagate themselves, whether they will or not.”⁴ He sees the family as the organic unity because family members behold the past together, live in the present together, and share the common life. He explains that a common spirit runs and rules the organic unity of the family. He says, “We use this word *spirit* to denote a power interfused, a comprehensive will actuating the members, regarding also the common body itself, as a larger and more inclusive individual.”⁵

He recognizes that the family spirit does not perfectly master and assimilate all the members because they participate in other communities such as, school, friends, malls, and social clubs. He thinks that early childhood is a perfect time to instill the Christian family spirit to children. He says, “Early childhood resists nothing. ... He sees the world through his parent’s eyes. Their objects become his. Their life and spirit mold him.”⁶ He asks Christian parents to provide living examples. The role of the Parents is to shape children’s faith at home while playing with them, showing Godly love, and family worship. He defines family worship “as the open state of prayer and communion with God in the house.”⁷

Bushnell criticizes the attitude that many Christians consider family worship or prayers as a kind of morning observance or a religious formality that is to have its value, under the laws of drill and habitual repetition. He recognizes the spiritual benefits of family worship and family prayers. Quoting Hosea 2:21-22 he insists that God

⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁷ Ibid., 334.

eventually provides the perfect and beautiful harmony to the world and “prayer can get into harmony with itself in its request.”⁸ He explains that prayer is not habitual repetition because God is always working toward the greatest harmony, and will not favor some prayers of words. He says, “God is for some largest harmony in the hearing of prayers, as in every thing else.”⁹ According to him, God is working toward the most inclusive harmony and prayer is to be successful, just according to the amount of concurrency there is in it.¹⁰ “Family prayer or communal prayer,” he believes, “wants the largest possible harmony praying with it; so that God may answer it for harmony’s sake, and not against harmony.”¹¹

He warns Christian parents not to pray with only superlative fervors or heats of piety, but with the sober, honest, and practical attitudes of life. His concern is that religious fervors and piety in family can separate children’s faith from their ordinary life. He says, “The only difficulty is in doing it (family prayer), when the prayers and the family religion are one side of every thing else, in a department by themselves, and the whole body of life’s practical works and ends is operating directly against the result desired and prayed for.”¹² The children grow into faith by a process of natural induction, “because their faith is both quickened and grown in the atmosphere of God’s own Spirit, always filling the house.”¹³

⁸ Ibid., 333.

⁹ Ibid., 336.

¹⁰ Ibid., 339.

¹¹ Ibid., 340.

¹² Ibid., 346.

¹³ Ibid., 347.

In my interviews with Asian Christians I often heard of their childhood experiences of family worship and prayers. A Vietnamese-American pastor said that his father, who was the first generation immigrant, led the family worship every evening and let his children read the Bible loudly and choose the hymns they wanted to sing. He remembers that the spirit of family prayers held the family together through difficult times in the strange land. In Korean churches the pastor visits all members' homes regularly and has worship and prayers with the family in their homes. All members of the family are expected to be present and participate in the worship whenever their pastor visits their home.

On the anniversaries of a loved ones' death all extended family members gather together and have memorial service and share food at home. Family prayer and worship is very familiar to Asian Christian families. Religious Christian education needs to support their efforts in the areas of family worship, rituals, and prayers with more resources and guidance. Churches can provide family prayer books or the order of family worship, which are based on the Asian value of family and community -- harmony with others and harmony with God.

Church as a Faith Community

Pointing out the changes in the family and family life in the twentieth century world, John Westerhoff III tries to frame a contemporary theory of Christian nurture in a community-of-faith perspective. He explains that the modern family's authority is limited and a complex configuration of societal forces impinges upon its influence.¹⁴ He

¹⁴ John Westerhoff III, *Living the Faith Community* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 2.

sees that the alternative is for the church to become a *mid community*, “that is, a faith community that exists between the family on one side and the society and its institutions on the other.”¹⁵

He criticizes American individualistic evangelism by saying,

“The essential nature of religious community is hard to grasp here on a continent where evangelists typically strive to win souls for Christ, but rarely for Christ and his church; where baptism is understood as a call to individual salvation, rather than an incorporation into a family; where the Eucharist is seen as food for the individual soul rather than a communal thanksgiving meal; and where the church is believed to be a voluntary association to which we individually belong by choice and withdraw at will, rather than an eternal relationship established by God, binding us together to be a sign and witness of God’s reign in human history.”¹⁶

Westerhoff describes the four necessary characteristics of a Christian faith community “as (1) a common story or memory and vision, (2) a common authority, (3) common rituals, (4) a common life together that is more like a family than an institution.”¹⁷ He also explains that there are particular signs in the Christian Community that are preconditions of its presence as a gift. Those signs are “(1) the narrative character of Christian community, (2) the role of worship as an authority for Christian life, (3) the liturgical experience necessary for Christian transformation and formation, and (4) the common life in Christ that nurtures an alternative consciousness among those who live in the world but not of the world.”¹⁸

The Asian congregations that I interviewed have all four characteristics that Westerhoff describes but the most visible characteristic is “the common life together”

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

like a family. All Asian congregations that I studied have active small groups, fellowship groups, or cell groups and they are basic units that members participate in and connect to the life of the church. Those small groups are *mid communities* between their biological families and church. They usually meet every week for study, prayer, sharing of concerns and joys, and fellowship. Small group life is as important as Sunday worship and rituals. In small groups they gather around the common authority, the Bible, and share their stories of daily lives. Children are present in most cases with their parents in small group meetings and they observe their parents' study, prayer, and fellowship while they also share fellowship among themselves. Faith is shaped and nurtured in these small group gatherings. Creating, nurturing, supporting small groups is an important educational ministry that Asian Christian congregations share.

As Charles Foster points out, "The life of a congregation and its larger cultural milieu influence the content and character of a person's faith commitments as much as, if not more than, the educational programs of a given congregation."¹⁹ According to Foster the goal or purpose of educational ministry of our church should be "to build up the church." "To build up does not mean simply to add new members. It involves nurture, instruction, interpretation, ecstatic utterance, hymn-sing, and sustenance and support. Its emphasis is corporate, not individual; personal, rather than private. Its focus is not upon the members of the congregation, but upon God."²⁰

According to Foster educational purposes in building community are (1) Church education binds the generations into community; (2) Church education is to nurture

¹⁹ Charles Foster, "The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education," in *Contemporary Approaches Christian Education*, by Seymour and Miller, et al., 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

partnership among the members of the community; and (3) Church education in “building community” links strangers as neighbors with hospitality.²¹ To accomplish bonding, partnership, and hospitality in Church education, Foster suggests four educational tasks: “(1) transmitting the vocabulary of Christian faith; (2) sharing the stories of faith; (3) nurturing interdependent relationships; and (4) practicing the life-style of Christian community.”²²

From my observation of Asian congregations, their image of “building up the church” is *respecting the church as a whole organic unity* rather than emphasizing bonding or partnership among individual members. In my interviews I observed some conflicts in the church between Western Christian value of egalitarian partnership and Asian community value of harmony and unity. About how to build up the church younger generations want to see more egalitarian partnerships between generations but older generations want to see more natural harmony between generations. Though they have different expectations about how to build up the church, both sides see the church as an extension of family as a given organic community. For them church is a part of the whole community of concentric circles and they respect the whole community as a living organism.

Religious Education in Asian churches needs to recognize that the church cannot be built up as a separate and isolated entity with value systems separate from the Asian value of family and community as the whole. They need to develop biblical and theological resources teaching how Christian’s value of partnership can be grafted in the soil of Asian value of family and community.

²¹ Charles Foster, *Educating Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 62-67.

From Latin American experience of base ecclesial communities Robert Pazmiño introduces an alternative model of Christian Religious education emphasizing the partnership between clergy and laity in a faith community. Affirming the fact that every believer has gifts for ministry, Pazmiño insists “These developments represent a challenge to the dominant patterns of theological education in the United States and suggest the need for a commitment by churches and theological schools to work cooperatively for the theological education of their adult and youth constituencies, in addition to traditional work with children.”²³ Asian churches and theological schools offer many Bible study classes and prayer groups for their members and lay leaders, but they do not equip them for leadership in ministry as true partners of clergy. Clergy’s unique call to ministry is “to discern the appropriate use of their gifts and authority in relation to an emerging partnership with the laity, a partnership that requires of clergy the reaffirmation of their teaching role and office.”²⁴

Beyond the partnership between clergy and laity, Pazmiño suggests the partnership with God, others, and the Holy Spirit in Christian education. He says, “This partnership is made explicit in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the work of Christian education is God’s work. God is the ultimate teacher who has called and gifted persons to assist.”²⁵ The awareness of the partnership with God and the Holy Spirit in Christian education enables all

²² Ibid., 68.

²³ Robert W. Pazmiño, *Latin American Journey* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1994), 76.

²⁴ Ibid., 78.

²⁵ Ibid., 134.

Christian people to see potentials and empowers them to address the problems they confront.²⁶

The task of religious educators in Asian churches is to find the biblical meaning of partnership in Asian contexts. In English, partnership means “two or more persons carrying on a common business or shared profit.”²⁷ As Pazmiño emphasizes, however, partnership in biblical context is initiated by God and continues in the ministry of the Holy Spirit rather than emphasizing individual persons’ egalitarian partnership. Chinese character, partnership, (*Jae-Hue*) means brotherhood (*Jae*) and a mutual trusting relationship for a higher goal (*Hue*). Partnership is a trusting relationship in brotherhood to serve higher goals in a community. In the Asian context partnership with God means uniting with *Heaven* in harmony by cultivating righteousness (*Li*) in community.

From my observation of Asian congregations, however, I admit that true partnership with God is needed not only between clergy and laity but also between the ministries of sacraments and order and the ministries of Christian education. Pazmiño emphasizes the teaching role of the clergy and partnership between pastoral ministry and educational ministry. He argues that the central task of ministry for pastors is teaching the Christian faith and educating members in the local church.²⁸ He says, “As a basic minimum, pastors need to gain some insights to foster and support the teaching ministries of others in their congregations. Not to fulfill this responsibility is to limit the possibilities for present and future generations.”²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 135.

²⁷ Webster's New World Encyclopedia, 9th ed., s.v. “partnership.”

²⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁹ Ibid., 82.

In all three Asian congregations where I visited the distinction between pastoral ministries and Christian education ministries is hierarchical and gender oriented. Pastors are males who lead worship, sacraments, and administration. They mostly do not get involved in Christian education ministries. Christian educators are mostly females who teach children and women. The relationship between pastors and Christian educators is hierarchical rather than cooperative and mutual.

A feminist Christian religious educator, Carol Lakey Hess, raises issues about women's development in faith communities in her book, *Caretakers of Our Common House*. She suggests that communities of faith can provide the "safe-houses" that allow for voice in girls through naming their experiences and telling their stories.³⁰ Naming experiences and telling stories can be strong educational ministry tools such as, "conversational education."³¹ Conversational education can happen in dialogues by engaging one another in honest and deep ways. It also can happen in Bible study by engaging texts which including different experiences and voices in the community. Also, it happens in the relationship with God by engaging in hard dialogue and deep connection with God.³²

Studying the story of Deborah in the Bible, Carol Lakey Hess insists that the conversational education can be promoted in faith communities by women in leadership who are "endowed with the spirit of indignation."³³ Carol Lakey Hess says, "Deborah's leadership is marked by a fiery indignation at the oppression of her people; she leads

³⁰ Carol Lakey Hess, *Cretakers of our Common House* (Nashville: Arbingdon Press, 1997), 146.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³² *Ibid.*, 209.

³³ *Ibid.*, 219.

them in a fight for their just right. Most strikingly, she works to protect the least vulnerable of her people, the young girls.”³⁴ This kind of leadership fosters partnership in ministry – ministry of passion for justice, empathy with the oppressed and the wisdom for judgment.³⁵

It is a challenge to Asian congregations to develop women in leadership who can promote deep conversations in the church. Deep conversations in Asian faith communities should take place in the contexts of Asian experiences, value systems, and cultures but there is fear of the deep conversations because the theological belly of Asians is too big and old with their long history of religions and culture. Developing women in leadership in worship, teaching and visioning in faith communities without diminishing the Asian value of femininity is a theological and educational task faced by Asian churches.

An Asian-American Christian educator, Fumitaka Matsuoka, sees racial-minority churches in U.S.A. as faith communities that provide shelters for their people who face hostility and oppression in the larger society. The context of Christian education in racial-minority churches consists of “experiences of the pain” of racism and the promise of the gospel in the “fringe existence of minority people.”³⁶ Racial-minority churches shape and nurture the faith of their members to search for a freedom and courage to live in the face of pain and to live out the promise of justice and love of the gospel. Asian-American Christians live in an in-between world that is between the community in which

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 225.

³⁶ Fumitaka Matsuoka, “The Church in a Racial-minority Situation,” in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* ed. Jack Seymour and Donald Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 103.

they find their immediate identity -- family or church -- and the dominant community (the wider society.)³⁷ They always struggle with shifting ethnic identities. The power of Christian stories, rituals, and symbols of the church reshapes their identity as God's people.

For Asian-American Christians, "The church is the place where we share our "in-between" state of life with one another and accept it as a legitimate state of being. The church is a trustworthy oasis in a world that does not understand the peculiarity of our liminal existence."³⁸ According to Matsuoka "liminality is experience of an in-between state of life, a state where we say, "I'm American," while the people around us are saying, "you are Asian." It is a state in-between thresholds of life, a state that invites both danger and opportunities."³⁹ Matsuoka sees Chinese-and Korean-American Christians, particularly among Asian Christians, "are experiencing that challenge to build a liminal thread of commonality"⁴⁰ because of their diverse backgrounds.

I observed the struggle with liminality in the three Asian congregations that I studied. Members of these congregations experienced the sense of brokenness of their community of concentric circles when they left their family, extended family, hometown, and home country. This sense of brokenness of community gives them the sense of liminal existence in broken circles because their identity and the higher goals of life are from the community of concentric circles. They try to rebuild the community of

³⁷ Ibid., 115.

³⁸ Ibid., 105.

³⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 116.

concentric circles again but the world-view and value system of dominant society are not congruent with their cultural communities.

Thus, Asian-American Christians understand that their faith communities are communities of sojourners. Sojourners struggle with the issue of identity. This struggle has to do with one's capacity to live in the midst of an ambiguous and fluid state of life in the broken circles.⁴¹ Matsuoka says "a search for identity, as reflected in the Asian-American communities of faith, has more to do with what it means to live a life that defies definition, rather than with who they are socially, psychologically or even ethnically. The question of identity is, in fact, a quest for freedom to live in the midst of such ambiguity and instability."⁴² The faith of Asian-American Christians is shaped by "Holy Insecurity,"⁴³ the gift of courage to live in an "in-between" world.

Matsuoka concludes that "a crucial task of Christian education for Asian American churches is to attend to the way the marks of our faith communities – trustworthiness in search of a common thread of liminality, courage and freedom to live in the midst of the Holy Insecurity, and advocacy for justice in the face of racism—are lived out in faithfulness."⁴⁴ I found that the Asian-American congregations try hard to build a common thread of liminality through focusing on their young generations – teaching them the native language and culture at Korean School or Chinese School on Saturdays, or trying to raise leaders of the next generation for their churches. Asian-American Christians constantly struggle with insecurity of identity and social position but

⁴¹ Ibid., 113

⁴² Ibid.,

⁴³ Ibid., 114.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 121.

their churches are places that shape their faith to receive their insecure identity to the state of Holy Insecurity. The future task of religious education of Asian churches is to rebuild the new sense of concentric circles of community guided by the Holy Spirit who is at work in the whole universe.

Alternative Model of Religious Christian Education:

The Universe as a Faith Community

The faith community is not limited to a group of people, a family or a church but God's whole creation. Mary Elizabeth Moore suggests that we are called to engage with the earth in educational ministry on our faith journey. The reason she suggests that the earth is a faith community is that God's creative works in on-going creation is sacred and our faith journeys are moving around the theme of sacredness. Moore says, "This is not to say that everything [in the book or] in creation is good. It is to say that everything – EVERYTHING -- has been touched by God's presence."⁴⁵ These sacred journeys are diverse and long because God's people are diverse and they suffer pains due to a misunderstanding of diversity but "all these journeys touch deep parts of life, and all have power to bind people with one another and the earth. All are transformative, or potentially so."⁴⁶

This educational model of "ministering with the earth" requires a new paradigm of daily living – living reverently and justly with all people of God and the earth. Moore claims that the important point of departure of the journey is "the journey of wondering –

⁴⁵ Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Ministering with the Earth* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 143.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

wondering at the magnificence of creation and at the sorrow of a hurting and longing world”⁴⁷ and move to the journey of wandering, retreating and the moments of decision – “facing the tug of God and the realities of a moment in time, knowing that what we discern and decide will shape the future.”⁴⁸

According to Moore there are sacred partners on the sacred journeys. On the sacred journey people of God pay attention to the voices of the suppressed and try hard to embrace forgotten partners in the ministry. Suppressed voices can be the voice of people of color, of women, of workers, of young or old, and the cry of animals and other beings. Ministering with the earth is cultivating partnership at the grassroots, in congregational life, among denominations and institutions, among leaders, and with people in trouble.⁴⁹ This ministry is possible through “(1) engaging in frequent celebration and worship; (2) attending to the quality of community life as in sharing meals and negotiating conflicts; (3) practicing acts of hospitality; (4) relating with people across time, age, and cultures; (5) establishing regular structures, rhythms and expectations for community life; (6) encouraging diversity, flexibility, and creativity; (7) sharing leadership and building mutuality; (8) engaging in common actions to serve and reform the world; (9) playing together; and (10) giving and receiving with the earth.”⁵⁰

It is also a sacred vocation for people of God to “minister with the earth” in a mutual relationship. Moore points out “*four particular actions for earthbound ministry: keeping Sabbath, tending cycles, engaging in transformative politics, and practicing*

⁴⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 128-35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

stewardship with creation.”⁵¹ In Judeo-Christian tradition Sabbath is a way of life more than a law and “it is way of living respectfully with creation.”⁵² In this new way of life God might become clearer in every relationship. The practice of tending cycles is to pay more attention to circles and cycles in all aspects of human life and nature. Moore calls our attention to the ethical dimension of this life style: “(1) respect earth and all life; (2) care for earth, protecting and restoring the diversity, integrity and beauty of the planet’s ecosystems; (3) promote social development and financial system that create and maintain sustainable livelihoods, eradicate poverty, and strengthen local communities.”⁵³

The call to engage in transformative politics is the political vocation of Christian communities, “seeking to transform human patterns of life and work—to reform existing patterns of social organization and action.”⁵⁴ Practicing stewardship with creation is not only human responsibility to God and creation and for the care of creation but “it is tending and caring the earth in a mutual relationship as embodied in Native Indian tradition”⁵⁵ or in Asian religious tradition and culture.

Asian traditional religions have understood well the sacredness of creation and the sacredness of the journey in connectedness, harmony, and mutuality between people and nature and people and divinity. Shamanistic ritual *Jaesukut* is a ritual for the recovery of harmony among humanity, nature, and gods. *Jaesu* means ultimate salvation realized by a new harmony recovered through eliminating disharmony. A Korean theologian says, “Shamanism is based on the premise that neither human beings nor nature itself hold the

⁵¹ Ibid., 143.

⁵² Ibid., 146.

⁵³ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 166.

ultimate power in the universe. The ultimate power is a divine one. Further, it holds that the divine power can be brought to bear positively on earthly sorrow and pain, and that human beings need not be inert recipients of fate but can take measures that will improve their situation.”⁵⁶ Buddhists teach not to step on ants even by accident. *Bangsang* is a Buddhist ritual releasing living creatures to nature regularly. They believe that every life is holy and sacred.

The Donghak movement in Korea, which arose in the last stage of the Yi dynasty against Japan’s invasion into Korea insisted that “essential to this movement was the insistence that heaven and earth meet in the concrete presence of each and every life as well as of the other person. Each and every person, or each and every life, was to be seen as the bearer of heaven or God.”⁵⁷ Because of their reverence of each life they set the ancestral tablet toward the self rather than toward the wall. Explaining Donghak theology Jong Chun Park explains that the change of ancestral tablet set in Donghak Movement was “actually an authentic revolution of all religious sacrifice in the sense that every person, regardless of his or her social, racial, and sexual background, is the bearer of God, the ultimate ground of all beings including one’s ancestor.”⁵⁸

Asian churches need to renew and re-theologize continually their rich traditional religious heritage of ‘ministering with all God’s creation according to Biblical teachings for their faith formation and nurture. They need more educational ministries that address nature at all generations (not only youth camp or children’s field trips) to nurture the sacredness of God’s creation.

⁵⁶ Cha Ok-Soon, “Shamanism in Korean Christianity and the Task of Indigenization,” in *Doing Theology with Love* ed. Chang Sang and So Heung-Ryul (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1996), 314.

⁵⁷ Jong Chun Park, *Crawl with God, Dance in the Spirit!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 141.

The faith community of concentric circles in Asian cultural context goes beyond nature to the whole universe. The view of cosmic community is deeply rooted in the *yin-yang* symbol, which is derived from the Confucian classic, I Ching. *Yin-yang* is the symbol of harmonious change. The *yin* is the dark principle, which is correlated with the moon. The *yang* is the light symbol, which is correlated with the sun. Every life and every thing in cosmos changes according to *yin-yang*. “*Yin* always changes to *yang* by union, *yang* changes to *yin* by separation. Union occurs through the expansion of *yin* and separation through the contraction of *yang*.”⁵⁹

For Asian Christians who have this cosmic view of life and community, the cosmic Christ who is described in Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians and Romans can be understood easily. Paul says,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies....Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:22-23, 26).⁶⁰

Every life and every thing in the cosmos groan together in the midst of cosmic suffering for the sake of the new creation. The whole creation groans in the pains of childbirth and the Spirit groans with the cosmos. While the cosmos waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed, the Spirit intercedes for the children of God with groans that words cannot express. “The eschatological appearance of the children of God is inseparably united with the new creation of the Mother Spirit,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁰ Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1991 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

groaning as in the pains of childbirth and interceding between her children and God the Father.”⁶¹

The Spirit who groans with the cosmos moves like wind. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) Korean *Pungruedo*, which is based on major Asian traditional religions – Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism -- teaches that the spiritual universe comes into the human spirit through the Way and reveals itself to cosmos. For Asian Christians who have experienced *Tao*, *Buddha*, or *Punrudo*, Christian faith means emptying the self and living with the Spirit who has been with them from the beginning, from the creation, because God created all humans with his Spirit.

The Spirit is the ‘Spirit’ of freedom (John 4:24), the ‘Light’ of peace (1 John 1:5), and the ‘Love’ in creation (1 John 4:16). The Spirit guides individual Christian’s characters to bear fruits and also guides the journeys of faith communities of concentric circles - from the family, the church, to all creation - toward Godself.

Alternative Model of Religious Christian Education for Asian Christians

Asians Christians nurture their faith in the communities of concentric circles, which are connected by the same vales from family to church and to cosmos. However, they sometimes experience those concentric circles of community as broken. This occurs when they face different values, culture, and ideals in communities where they live in. This is due to the realization that different religious culture and practices sometimes

⁶¹ Ibid., 147.

nurture these communities. The task of religious Christian education for Asian Christians is to help them share the sense of brokenness of community and to renew their understanding of community.

The alternative model of religious Christian education for Asian, I suggest, is the faith community of spiral stairs rather than the community of concentric circles. The faith community of spiral stairs begins with Logos (gospel) and continues building up communities in solidarity with others, nature, cosmos, and God. This faith community of spiral stairs moves on the *Way* and keeps journeying toward God. It is a sequence of open communities and open journeys. On the journey people are open to questions and struggles of others and open to God's guidance. The task of religious Christian education is to empower people to follow the Spirit on the *Way* of spiral stairs and to encourage all Christians to journey together. The Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, leads the journey of his people. This journey is a "journey together" toward the Kingdom of God

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